

CHARTING THE PATHWAY TOWARD CONGREGATIONAL RENEWAL:
ADDRESSING THE DECLINE IN NEBRASKA METHODISM

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To My Mother

ABSTRACT

This project began with realization that congregational reform or renewal needs to happen in churches today. The experiences over the past ten years of pastoral ministry have confirmed this need. The fresh winds of God's reviving Spirit are urgently and desperately needed in the life of United Methodist congregations because many churches are declining in membership and worship attendance.

New leadership will be required to see renewal happen. This new leadership must include clergy and lay persons. What will be required of new leadership is to understand the emerging culture, especially the impact of postmodern thinking on American society.

To get congregations "on the way" toward a revitalized spirit, this project presents the conceptual and theological foundations of an integrated pathway (spiritual, structural, theological, and conceptual) for congregational reform. While focusing on the concepts and theological beliefs in this project, the spiritual and structural teachings are vitally important.

The conceptual teachings focus on the culture, change, and leadership. The theological foundations focus on church identity or being. These conceptual and theological teachings were presented at a leadership conference or teaching gathering.

This leadership conference was enthusiastically received and evaluations indicate that the participants were helped in seeing the need for congregational reform but also came away with new understandings about culture, leadership, the missional identity of the church, and a strong sense of commitment to the revitalization of Valentine Church. The positive reaction to the conceptual and theological teachings affirms the project's thesis, which posits that signs of congregational reform will happen when the congregation gets "on the way" through receiving critical conceptual and theological teaching.

CHAPTER 1

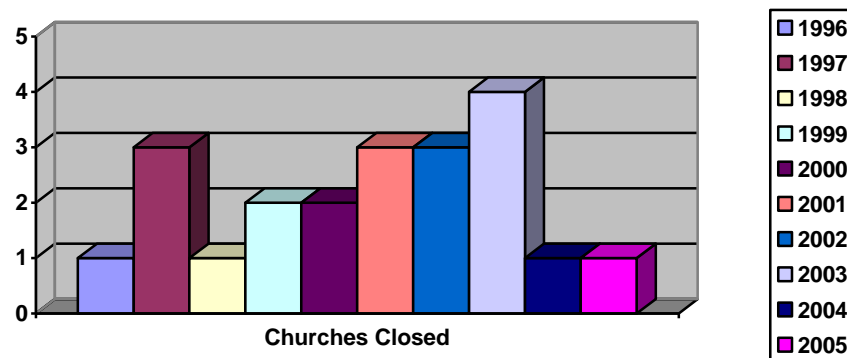
PROLEGOMENA

Why This Project

This project on congregational reform emerges from this writer's pastoral experiences since 1996 as a United Methodist clergyperson, who has served churches with small memberships (less than 100). The Nebraska Conference of The United Methodist Church¹ over this time has created parishes of two or more churches so that these small membership churches could continue to participate in the mission of Christ, and has closed local congregations in response to declining and struggling churches.

Figure 1.1

United Methodist Church Closures in Nebraska²



Other United Methodist pastors in Nebraska share this writer's concern for congregational revitalization. In a speech to laity and clergy at Annual Conference, the

¹This is the legal incorporated name of the denomination. Henceforth, "United Methodist Church" will be used as the descriptive title.

²Original, statistical research by the author from *Nebraska Conference Journals*, 1969 to 2005.

yearly meeting for all United Methodist churches in Nebraska, Wayne Alloway, the chairperson of the Congregational Development Team, expressed these sobering but attentive words: “I’m here on behalf of the Congregational Development Team to announce far more sobering news: our Annual Conference is dying. In 1970, the membership of the Nebraska Conference was 184,000 members. On December 31, 2004, the Conference membership stood at 84,337. That’s a loss of 63,667 members. **63,667 members – gone.**”³

This concern for congregational and denominational revitalization extends beyond Nebraska organizationally. United Methodist pastor and prayer evangelist Terry Teykl writes, “As a United Methodist pastor for twenty-eight years, I am convinced that our denomination and our people are desperate for a fresh outpouring of God’s power. We need a wake-up call!”⁴ This author agrees with Teykl’s assessment that the United Methodist Church needs a desperate wake-up call because the past demographic trends point to escalating decline and struggle (See chapter 4 “State of The United Methodist Church”) in the future.

Wesleyan Studies professor Paul Chilcote adds, “I believe contemporary churches that identify themselves with the Wesleys need to recover something of the dynamism of the early Methodist movement.”⁵ Christian futurist Leonard Sweet writes, “The handwriting is on the wall. Many mainline Protestant churches are broke, or already on

³Wayne Alloway, Report as Chairperson of the Congregational Development Team, Nebraska Annual Conference, June 2005. For full report, see Appendix 1. Please note that, in the figures, subtracting 63,667 from 184,000 comes to 98,337. The report mentioned the quoted figure of 84,337. Despite the difference in figures, the membership loss remains significant. Bold emphasis by author.

⁴Terry Teykl, *Pray the Price* (Muncie, IN: Prayer Point Press, 1997) , 9.

⁵Paul Wesley Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesley's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004) , 11.

financial life-support systems. Some church buildings are lucky: endowments keep the empty pews warm, the rooms well-lit, and the roof secure.”⁶

The people of God as the United Methodist Church desperately need the fresh wind of God’s love and presence in their lives so that they can then share that love with others who need the same experience. The institutional expression of “church” fails to do this. Capo Beach Calvary pastor Chuck Smith Jr. correctly points out that “Christian institutions, too, are beginning to realize that their methods of evangelism, discipleship, and fund-raising simply do not work well anymore.”⁷ To fulfill this mission, dying congregations need a present word of real encouragement from their clergy, leaders in congregations, and denominational officials. This encouragement must not be the latest program emerging from the denomination. Congregational reform or revitalization needs to take place among many United Methodist congregations and congregations in independent and mainline faith traditions. By “reform” this author means “the renewal of a missional identity and passion in participating with Christ in the mission field.”

Many United Methodist churches in Nebraska are located in rural areas, are small in membership, and are small in worship attendance. These two dynamics (smallness and rural location) further add to the complexity of the current struggle and declension in churches which continue to lose their social and religious significance, influence, and power in postmodern culture. Persons living in postmodern culture and shaped by postmodern ethos are not being reached effectively by contemporary expressions of

⁶Leonard Sweet, *Eleven Genetic Gateways to Spiritual Awakening* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998) , 17.

⁷Chuck Smith Jr., *The End of the World As We Know It: Clear Direction for Bold and Innovative Ministry in a Postmodern World* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001) , 15.

church. As a result, many churches are struggling, declining, and dying in various degrees of congregational death.

George Barna makes two critical reflections about the state of the church in North America. First, he writes, “The Church needs a radical shakeup; it has been static for so long that people sleepwalk through their religious paces, oblivious to the fact that many of their beliefs and practices dishonor God.”⁸ Second, “Christianity has become a costless faith in the U.S. We are a country of comfortable, compromising believers.”⁹ Barna’s reflections connect directly with the current loss of social and cultural influence by local churches throughout North America in this postmodern culture. Each year, churches in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe continue to play less of a role in people’s lives as postmodern culture emerges, even though the cultural and religious landscape continues to be spiritual (but not necessarily in a Christian sense or orientation).

Each year, small membership churches in the United Methodist Church face escalating pressures: finances, worship attendance, aging members and church friends, diminishing young families and people, loss of spirit de corps and morale, and denominational issues. Each year, these pressures are becoming more forceful in their impact on all areas of church life: worship, fellowship, evangelism, ministry, and discipleship. Consequently, morale continues to decline in those churches among its members and leaders. Even the larger membership churches (over 100 in worship attendance) in the United Methodist Church face increasing pressure. No United Methodist church, large or small, is exempt from those aforementioned pressures and

⁸George Barna, *The State of the Church: 2005* (Ventura, CA: The Barna Group, 2005) , 90.

⁹Ibid., 90.

thus face and an unknown future unless reform occurs among the churches and denomination in the near future.

As these current trends continue to accelerate negatively among all United Methodist congregations, the issue of survival becomes stronger as the congregations age and membership declines. As a United Methodist pastor, passionate concern about the future grows stronger in light of the present circumstances that all United Methodist churches face. As a follower of Christ, passionate concern about the future of God's people in other mainline denominations and independent congregations grows stronger as well.

Revelation 2 and 3 shows us Jesus' concern for God's people in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Jesus' words are striking and apropos with God's people today, especially Jesus' words to the people at Ephesus and Laodicea. To God's people at Ephesus, Jesus says, "But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen from your first love."¹⁰ To God's people at Laodicea, Jesus says, "I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were one or the other!" (Rev. 3:15). The loss of first love and lukewarmness, the two spiritual conditions which characterized the churches at Ephesus and Laodicea respectively, typifies the present spiritual state of many – if not all – United Methodist congregations of all theological perspectives throughout Nebraska as well as throughout American Methodism in this country.

¹⁰Revelation 2:4-5 NLT (New Living Translation). Henceforth, subsequent biblical references will come from the NLT unless noted differently. Biblical references will be parenthetically referenced and abbreviated.

Concern for a positive future as a passionate people of God is a primary reason for the project, with an extended emphasis to God's people universally among all mainline denominations and independent churches. However, the ultimate motivating factor for the project is love. While spiritual vitality and reform are necessary aims of the project, the ultimate goal is to help congregations share in real and incarnate ways the love of God in Christ with people who now live in the newly emerging culture of postmodernism. The Bible is the story of God's grace and love, supremely incarnated in through Jesus, towards people. "We love him," writes (John) Wesley on the love of God, "because he first loved us – This is the sum of all religion, the genuine model of Christianity. None can say more. Why should any one say less? Or less intelligibly?"¹¹ Love for God's people and all people ultimately centers this project and author's call to be a missional pastor, a pastor who approaches ministry with passion from a viewpoint of God's mission.

Thesis Project

To test the hypothesis of the thesis, a **Leadership Conference** or workshop will be conducted to present the foundational teachings. For this project, the **Leadership Conference** will focus on the conceptual and theological issues with the intention of planning future conferences which will focus on the spiritual and structural foundations. The Leadership Conference will be included as an appendix. Through a multi-media presentation, these seminars will help church members and leaders understand the present

¹¹John Wesley, "Notes on the New Testament," 1 John 4:18-19 in Robert W. Burtner and Robert E. Chiles, *John Wesley's Theology Today: A Collection from His Works* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1982), 203.

reality among United Methodist Churches in Nebraska, help them critically reflect on both core questions of this project, introduce participants to basic concepts regarding postmodern culture and ethos along with ministry issues arising in this postmodern context, especially the significant need for new leadership.

Another aim of the **Leadership Conference** is to begin a process of changing the leadership culture of the church by getting church leaders on the pathway toward congregational reform by inviting them to be participants. The pathway toward congregational reform will not be grounded in the pastor alone but in and through a team of participants (church leaders and others) who prayerfully desire to see the renewing and reforming work of God. Without the integrative leadership between church leaders and pastor, the process and progress of congregational reform will fail to grow, nurture, and mature.

The format for the introductory seminar along with any further subsequent seminars will parallel the dynamic gatherings of the early Christian communities: “They joined with the other believers and devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord’s Supper and in prayer” (Acts 2:42). Each session will have a teaching time (i.e., a conversation) via media presentation or video, a sharing and eating time, reflection time, and intercessory prayer. The heart of the time together will occur in a dynamic manner to allow the Holy Spirit to lead the conversation and instill new dreams of leadership and ministry.

A **Post-Leadership Conference Survey** will (1) measure the level of awareness of the present state of the local church in this author’s present ministry assignment and United Methodist churches throughout Nebraska; (2) measure participants’ knowledge

about culture, ministry, and leadership; (3) assess congregational leaders' understanding of postmodern culture to see if they understand how postmodern culture impacts the life of the church; and (4) measure how participants answer the core questions of the project. This survey will be included as an appendix.

Setting of Thesis Project

The setting for this project is Valentine, Nebraska, located in the north central part of the state in an area known as the "Sandhills," a descriptive term which accurately describes the land as both sand and hills. The town's website describes the town as "Nebraska's Heartcity."¹² The town is located two hours away from the nearest large city (North Platte, Nebraska). While geographically isolated, residents travel frequently to Omaha, Lincoln, and Rapid City, South Dakota for a variety of activities. Because of the Niobrara River, tourists flock to the town for tubing, canoeing, and other recreational activities. Many people frequent the town as a summer destination spot, and as a gateway to other destinations (Badlands National Park; the Black Hills National Forest; Mount Rushmore National Monument; the motorcycle bike rally in Sturgis, South Dakota; the Black Hills Passion Play in Spearfish, South Dakota; and a variety of hunting and fishing locations).

Valentine's population has been stable throughout the 1990s. The population was 2,874 in 1990 and 2,862 in 1999.¹³ Projected future populations reveal a stable outlook,

¹²See the city of Valentine, (Valentine, NE: GD Media Group, 2007) , www.valentine-ne.com, (accessed August 25, 2004). The town's web site gives a full description of Valentine. Other information to be found on the site includes the following: population, climate, education, housing, medical care, etc

¹³These statistics come from Nebraska State Data Center, Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, "1990 Census of Population and Housing, Nebraska" as documented on Valentine's town website (accessed August 25, 2004).

albeit an older population. Forty-five percent of the county's population lives within the city of Valentine. Despite showing a historical pattern of population stability, the town is filled with many persons from the World War II and Korean generations and filled with persons – boomers -- who are coming back to live in retirement. Valentine is not a young town demographically.

The town's economy continues to be cattle ranching, tourism, and the Rosebud American Indian Reservation (Rosebud, South Dakota). Valentine faces increasing economic challenges. Ranching continues to grow larger as the number of ranchers decline. Jobs come from the "blue collar" service industry, such as McDonalds, Subway, restaurants, and mercantile stores. However, these jobs cannot provide an adequate living wage for young working class people. From an economic perspective, young people will not be able to stay in the town following high school graduation.

Further descriptive analysis of Valentine comes from Percept, a company that provides demographic statistics and analysis to churches and denominations.¹⁴ Percept provides analysis through the following categories: people and places, faces of diversity, community issues, and faith perspectives.

For Valentine, Percept projects a slight decline in population through 2008. People living in and around the town will continue to consist mostly of rural families. No significant growth from young persons or families is expected. What is anticipated is the continuing aging of the town's population. In terms of diversity, Valentine remains virtually a monolithic population which is heavily Anglo but not monocultural. No significant percentage of African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, or Native Americans

¹⁴This information from Percept was made available to me through the Nebraska Conference of The United Methodist Church by District Superintendent Richard Jacobsen.

lives in the town or county. Racial and ethnic diversity exists but only in a small percentage of population.

The traditional, nuclear family describes accurately many families. Seventy-four percent of the couples are married. More children increasingly go to college, with a considerable number achieving a degree. Because of the lack of economic opportunities, many children do not look for employment in Valentine. Also, in the area of faith, many people view faith (in historic Christian expressions through various denominations) as important; however, participation and commitment in local churches represents a similar decline in mainline congregations throughout the country. Each year, participation is growing less as congregations grow older. Preferences in worship style and music tend toward a mixed of traditional and contemporary expressions of worship and singing.

The Project's Aims

Christian futurist Bill Easum asks, "Will many of our congregations, like the dinosaurs, become extinct?"¹⁵ He uses the metaphor "dancing with dinosaurs" as a critically reflective image to examine the present state of the contemporary church in a postmodern culture, and to engage congregational leaders in thinking creatively and imaginatively about new forms or new wineskins of ministry. Implicitly, through his book and thoughts, his approach to postmodern culture emerges as a positive one in which he favors critical but discerning engagement with culture. For Easum, new wineskins of ministry are needed in order to minister effectively in this new cultural setting; otherwise, congregations will dance with the dinosaurs and head toward

¹⁵Bill Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15.

extinction, leaving behind only fossil remains of those congregations who failed to engage (i.e., communicate) postmodern culture.

This author agrees with Easum's assessment that time has come for new wineskins of ministry, as Jesus affirmed. "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins" (Matt. 9:17). Without new forms of ministry, churches will "dance with the dinosaurs" into extinction. The project aims to help congregations and their leaders wrestle with that critical and futuring question, and wrestle with possible scenarios on a pathway toward congregational reform. There will be no "final" answer or "final" scenario that addresses sufficiently all the futuring questions. Many answers and scenarios will exist simultaneously in relation to one another as congregations face the future in trying to be faithful to Jesus command. Uniting all churches together in ministry will be the emerging culture of postmodernism as it continues to morph or emerge into many forms.

This project aims to foster creative and imaginative scenario thinking. Any preferred future will require the new leadership art of "scenario thinking" which is a means of approaching the future through envisioning scenarios, (i.e., possibilities, not elaborate or exact descriptions of the future). The postmodern future will be changing so quickly that detailed possibilities regarding the future are too precise and deterministic.¹⁶ Whereas programmatic thinking often promotes inflexibility, scenario thinking "promotes flexibility and preparedness and seeks to keep life more like an adventure than like completing a to-do list."¹⁷ In other words, scenario thinking opens leadership to a

¹⁶See Alvin Toffler. *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970).

¹⁷Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003) , 263. The idea of scenario thinking first came to this writer's attention through the writings of Leonard Sweet. This author credits him for such an approach to leadership and leadership thinking.

movement of God's Spirit and adventure with God outside the box of traditional forms of ministry.

Currently, too much programmatic thinking and strategizing takes place inside United Methodist churches and the denominational offices, which leads to programmatic approaches to ministry by local church leaders and denominational officials. Program ministry is an approach to ministry through programs. In the process, and consequently, any movement of the Holy Spirit becomes stifled. Paul's word's says it well, "Do not quench the Spirit."¹⁸ This is what typically happens during programmatic planning, strategizing, and dreaming.

In agreement with Leonard Sweet, scenario thinking opens leadership to the mysterious movement of the Holy Spirit. Scenario thinking engages God in an ongoing manner, and encourages another form of dance – dancing with the Holy Spirit. This style of thinking opens leadership to dance with God's Spirit rather than anchoring to human-centered ideas and thoughts. Scenario thinking also encourages the leadership arts of creativity and imagination, two arts essentially missing in modern leadership practices but essential for effective leaders in postmodern times.

Another aim of project is to cultivate new leaders, clergy and lay alike, who will risk asking Easum's futuring question so that the dance with the dinosaurs will stop. United Methodist churches throughout Nebraska are dancing with the dinosaurs, as indicated by loss of identity and missional impact in the communities. Local churches remain ineffective in connecting with people in culture. While the degree of church declension and some church closures remain directly related to the declining population

¹⁸1 Thessalonians 5:19 NKJ (New King James).

areas of Nebraska (outside the Interstate 80 corridor), dancing with the dinosaurs by dying churches, who have lost their identity, is also a significant factor.

Some may be in a slow dance, while others may be in a foxtrot. Church closings will continue. Present forms of ministry will continue to decrease in effectiveness. Witness will lack passion, purpose, and power. Faithfulness to God will further erode, leaving the churches in the sorrowful spiritual states that Jesus found in Ephesus and Laodicea. New leadership will be required to minister effectively in this postmodern culture and reverse the dance with the dinosaurs.

Was it the dinosaurs' nearsightedness that caused them to be blind to all the change in their environment? Or was it the dinosaurs' stiff necks that refused to adapt to the new conditions? Those two questions asked by Easum need to be asked and answered by all dying or struggling congregations. For Easum, "Congregations must deal with their stiff necks or their nearsightedness, or go the way of the dinosaurs."¹⁹ The aim, hope, and prayer of this project is that congregations choose a preferred future in which the passion of God ignites reform inside congregations by asking and answering the questions that Easum raises. This will require new leaders who understand leadership from the perspective of postmodern culture and who will take risks and leap with faith into the future.

A fourth aim of the project seeks to open leaders to the work of the Holy Spirit through scenario thinking exercises which will allow perspectives to be wide open to all the fresh possibilities of God's dreams for any local congregation. New, postmodern leadership thinking will lead to fresh wineskins of leadership and ministry in the life of

¹⁹Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, 15.

local churches. Scenario thinking will be a catalyst for authentic and transformative leadership to emerge in any congregation. Unless this new style of postmodern leadership emerges, it will be difficult for congregations to walk the pathway of congregational reform. Cassidy Dale sums up succinctly the importance of scenario thinking:

Scenario thinking breaks you out of your single view of the present and the future and allows you to re-perceive the present. For example, many people ask themselves very basic questions, “Are things getting better or are they getting worse? Are we dying or being born?” If they decide that things are getting worse, that the world is descending into oblivion, then they will interpret events in their world and their lives to be clear evidence that things are falling apart. If they decide that things are getting better, that a new world is being born, then they will interpret the oddities and chaos of the present as being evidence of the birth pangs. As Paul wrote in Romans, all of creation is involved in one great act of giving birth? How might what is going on now in the world – and in your own life – be a part of that birthing?²⁰

Thesis Statement

Two questions form the heart of the project. The first is Bill Easum’s question, “Will many of our congregations, like the dinosaurs, become extinct?” The second is Leonard Sweet’s question, “Is your church ready to seize tomorrow?”²¹ These two questions are ongoing in the sense that there can never be final answers – only ongoing reflections and scenarios as congregations prayerfully and discerningly move into the future and must engage those two core questions in order to minister effectively and powerfully to postmodern people who need the love and grace of Christ in their lives through a loving community.

These two questions also function as critiquing questions to the project and thesis. The thesis, as is the project, is a beginning, a pathway – not an end or an exact map that

²⁰Cassidy Dale, e-mail to Leonard Sweet (24 June 2001) , as quoted in Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive*, 264.

²¹The question is the subtitle of Leonard Sweet’s book *Carpe Manana* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001). This author gives him credit as the original source for these reflections and ultimately the thesis.

simply lays out an exact route. A modern approach to the current problems would be to analyze the problems and identify final solutions. The institutional church in any denomination tends to be programmatic and methodological in leadership style and ministry. More money, more time, more energy – these are the keys to a “successful” ministry from an institutional standpoint. Emerging Church leader Brian McLaren makes this astute point: “When you’re on a really long voyage, you have to get beyond asking, ‘Are we there yet?’ and instead start asking, ‘Are we making progress?’”²²

In the broadest sense, the project presents a scenario, not a final answer to the question, “Are we there yet?” The project presents a scenario to make progress on the spiritual journey of God’s people, United Methodist and otherwise, towards a future of effective, incarnational presence of Christ in postmodern times. The nature of the future is chaotic (from a human perspective in experiencing change, not God’s) and requires a spiritual and intellectual openness to new ideas for ministry. The project centers its design on a willingness to examine itself in light of the ever-changing future and the necessity to question core ideas and assumptions.

The project’s thesis is that signs of congregational reform among dying and struggling churches throughout The United Methodist Church will become evident through an integrated paradigm or pathway which is spiritual, conceptual, structural, and theological in nature. The spiritual is the foundation of prayer, repentance, and God’s Word. The conceptual is the foundation of teachings about culture, change, and leadership. The structural is the foundation of new forms of ministry (i.e., the new wine skins) in postmodern times. The theological is the recreation of corporate identity as a

²²Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) , xviii.

church in mission, that is a missional church. This project will focus on the conceptual and theological dimensions.

Signs of reform will be a renewed love of Christ as evident among church members and friends. A new sense of vocational mission will be evident by the leadership. A strong desire to embrace change will emerge among the congregation that leads them to believe that “the church *must* change. The church is not trend-driven; it is God’s family and lives by other rules. But it is also a cultural and social institution, rooted in a given place and time. If we have any concerns for the rising generations – and for those who will follow them – we must look with urgency to the future shape of our church.”²³ Another sign will be a spiritual thirst for the Word of God in their lives, which deepens and matures their faith, thus causing a holy dissatisfaction with the way church life presently is. Finally, the people will have a passion for prayer – intercessory and revival prayer specifically.

Because of the significant level of loss, struggle, and decline among many congregations, only an integrated pathway will be systemic enough to affect the entire life of a congregation through new forms of fresh ministries by Spirit-formed leaders, who will be mentored through leadership conferences or private mentoring sessions. “Spirit-formed” refers to the ongoing openness to the working and power of God’s Spirit as manifested in the character of leaders who encounter and engage Easum’s and Sweet’s question with faith, passion, enthusiasm, and hope.

The thesis further argues that new forms of Spirit-formed leadership and leaders will be required so that congregational reform can take place. Without such leadership,

²³Gerard Kelly, *Retrofuture: Rediscovering Our Roots, Recharting Our Routes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999) , 16.

reform will be extremely difficult if not impossible. The new form of congregational leaders will be Spirit-formed, “culturally relevant” leaders. “Culturally relevant” means engaging and conversing with people who live in a postmodern culture and share postmodern ethos and ethics.

The heart of cultural relevancy is a passionate commitment by church leaders, who have a missionary spirit, to communicate with the people who live in these postmodern times so that caring and loving relationships form in such a manner that authentic and genuine church becomes experienced by isolated and fragmented postmodern people who desperately need such experiences. For them, God’s Church is presently “out of touch” with their lives because the people inside the local church cannot communicate with postmodern people. Do the people inside the church really want to? In dying churches, the answer seems obvious. In dying churches, the dance with the dinosaurs will continue and closure will happen.

The Project’s Audience

Who is this project addressed to? This thesis is written to those church leaders, lay and ordained, who desire to minister effectively to people who live outside the church in a culture that is shaped by postmodern values and ethics. The heart of such leaders is missional passion, as reflected by the Son. It is this author’s hopeful desire that these leaders will abandon themselves to Christ and His kingdom and seek new relationships with people who need Christ for spiritual transformation. Integral to reaching new people will be communication in which the church is presently struggling significantly at this. Many church leaders and members can only communicate with “insiders,” whereas many

postmodern people are “outsiders.” Adding to the complex situation is the breakdown in communication between the younger generations who are presently in church but decreasingly so. This failure to communicate is also reaching inside the church. This project serves to help church leaders communicate with these youth who are also impacted by postmodern ethos and values through media, especially television and film. Effective ministry in the postmodern world will require church leaders to talk about what the Good News of Jesus Christ is doing in their lives.

Challenges & Limitations

The project faces important challenges and limitations. The most challenging task of the thesis project (a reform paradigm or scenario) will be the cultivation of Spirit-formed leaders who will “rethink” current ministries through scenario thinking. Leaders will need to think as missionaries in this postmodern culture. The difficulty centers on the entrenched practices and attitudes toward ministry since lay persons have been – and continue to be – shaped by old paradigms of ministry by leaders who promote programs and simply “do” and “run” church based upon modern practices of institutional church and ministry.

The level of entrenchment of these old, programmatic models of ministry and church is systematically extensive because the bureaucratic, hierarchal models of organizational structure infiltrate the life of the local church and denominations deeply. Consequently, all areas of church life suffer from leadership that simply “runs” church through program ministries. Any receptiveness to any innovative ideas diminish in this setting.

Another critical limitation of the leadership conference is the time it takes to change the leadership culture of any congregation as well as identifying and cultivating new, Spirit-formed leaders. Because many clergy and laity remain anchored to these “programmatic” ideas and methods, the formation of Holy Spirit-formed, culturally-relevant leaders is no easy road to travel because resistance to change by clergy and lay persons remains high, especially in those congregations that are severely depressed and discouraged. Adding to this difficulty from a United Methodist perspective is the frequent movement of pastors. Longer pastorates over five years rarely exist. The fundamental change of the culture of leadership will require long-term commitments by the denomination. United Methodist pastors need to stay longer in ministry assignments.

Working Assumptions

The project is conceptualized through various working assumptions. An assumption is “a statement accepted or supposed as true without proof or demonstration.”²⁴ These assumptions function as interpretive filters which are dynamic in the sense that they are not static but continuously being formed and transformed. All assumptions in the project are examined and critiqued continuously so that growth will continue by this author. These assumptions are always open to change, revision, and deletion when needed and necessary. In addition, these assumptions are “working” in the sense of always forming this author’s thoughts and writing. The project is not neutral. The project interactively converses with these working assumptions. All this author’s beliefs and theological understandings of culture, ministry, and church, universal and particular (i.e., local congregation), emerge from these assumptions.

²⁴*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 2d college ed. (1982), s. v. “Assumption”.

According to Practical Theology professor John Drane, “any description of the condition of the Church in today’s world (or of anything else, for that matter) is never neutral, but is always going to be determined by the attitudes and understandings that the interpreter brings.”²⁵ The project therefore does not represent an unbiased, interpretive scenario. The project is not neutral in theory or practice. The project represents an ongoing attempt by this author to understand church and ministry from the frontlines of pastoral ministry in a local church amidst an emerging culture of postmodernism.

The first working assumption is that revival and reform are needed among mainline congregations as well as independent Christian churches. In the context of this author’s present ministry assignment, or ministry appointment, warning signs of struggle and declension continue to increase and intensify among United Methodist congregations of all membership sizes and worship attendances. This parallels the conditions in this author’s two, previous ministry assignments from 1998 to 2003. For the past twenty-four years, the Nebraska Conference has experienced continuous membership decline. Membership in Nebraska now stands under 88,000. What is now being experienced in Nebraska is currently being experienced in other conferences throughout the United States. Congregational reform is desperately needed throughout the denomination in the United States.

Mike Regele, co-founder of Percept Group Inc., affirms the continuous need for congregational reform. He writes, “The INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH in America...has built up many structures of self-dependence upon which it relies and into which it pours

²⁵John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church’s Future* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001) , 9.

great resources. Yet these structures are failing.”²⁶ For United Methodist congregations these structures of self-dependence come in the forms of ministry programs with accompanying organizational structure and personnel. This programmatic approach to ministry only acerbates the current struggle and decline. Program ministry fails, and a sense of hopeless and helplessness accelerates among many congregations because the latest program from the denominational office has failed. An ironic circle of program failure and congregational decline exists inexorably. Further, Regele adds that many congregations are heading toward a “defining moment,” a moment in which a congregation chooses to either adapt and embrace change or die.²⁷ What Regele says is affirmed by Easum and others but from different perspectives. Many scholars and ministry consultants recognize the immense problems that face dying congregations today.

Thomas Bandy is another who recognizes the need for congregational reform, and assumes it in his writings. With Easum, he provides consultant ministry for churches through Easum, Bandy & Associates (www.easumbandy.com). He writes, “Christendom has been sick unto death for well over 100 years. We began to recognize this clearly during the past 50 years. Yet, the actual death of congregations is happening suddenly, quickly, and with an odd sense of surprise on the part of church leadership.”²⁸ For Bandy, Regele and others, diagnostic analysis of the contemporary church no longer needs to happen. Decline and struggle are real realities; their impact colossal or tsunami-like. Rather than focusing on what is happening, the focus needs to be on what needs to

²⁶Mike Regele, *Death of the Church*, with collaboration by Mark Schulz (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995) , 19.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸Thomas G. Bandy, *Moving Off the Map: A Field Guide to Changing the Congregation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998) , 18.

happen in local churches to address congregational struggle and decline. This author believes that congregational reform is needed desperately, and what needs to happen is to get congregational leaders headed on the pathway towards experiencing reform.

A second working assumption is the belief that God is the God of revival. As a sovereign act, God Almighty pursues the people of God and invites them back into a loving relationship. Revival, according to authors Henry Blackaby and Claude King, is returning to the Lord. They write, “The essence of revival is returning to the Lord.”²⁹ God’s invitation extends from Old Testament times to today: “But if you return to me and obey my commands...I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored (Neh. 1:9) ; “Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord God Almighty” (Zech. 1:3) ; and “Now return to me, and I will return to you” (Mal. 3:7).

God’s outpouring of revival can be seen throughout the Bible. Old Testament professor Walter Kaiser Jr. critically examines major biblical revivals. He writes these timely words: “The message of our Lord is still just as powerful as it ever was. It is infused with the same words that carry life to all who will listen.”³⁰ God extends an ongoing invitation to revival – “returning to me” – which is a message that speaks loudly today, just as it did throughout biblical times and throughout history. The key is whether or not God’s people, United Methodist or otherwise, will listen.

According to Missiologist professor Wesley Duewel, God acts sovereignly in history through revival and reform, and God’s reviving and renewing work continues today. From England to America, from Ireland to South Africa, from India to China, God

²⁹Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Fresh Encounter: Experiencing God Through Prayer, Humility and A Heartfelt Desire to Know Him* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1996) , 23.

³⁰Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Revive Us Again: Biblical Principles for Revival Today* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001) , 228.

has brought revival fire to His people throughout the world. God's "return to me" invitation has been historically responded to by the people of God, who intensely desired the revival fire of God. The history of revival shows that God initiates revival. An important point to remember in revival history is that "God is more hungry to give us revival than we are hungry to be revived."³¹

Third, all aspects (diagnostic, evaluative, conceptual) of the project are grounded in optimism and hopefulness because "it is never too late for God to work. No situation is ever so hopeless that it is useless to pray. No church can become so compromising or backslidden that God cannot send fresh, new blessing. No people has ever become so sinful that God gave them up and no longer yearned to save them."³² The biblical narrative shows God's unending faithfulness, mercy, and compassion towards His people in all times and places despite their moral depravity and spiritual state. Even though the spiritual condition of God's people may be extremely desolate, no people are beyond God's revival fire even though hopelessness may abound, as it does in many churches today. God's people are important to God. As Christian authors H. B. London Jr. and Neil Wiseman emphasize, "Every assignment is holy ground because Jesus gave himself for the people who live there."³³

While affirming a positive attitude, this writer shares a similar cynical attitude with missiologist leaders Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, who make this observation: "At times we feel terribly cynical about the ability of the church to reinvent itself. At other times our hearts are filled with hope at the brave experiments that are taking place. And

³¹Wesley Duewel, *Revival Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995) , 354.

³²Ibid., 19.

³³H. B. London Jr. and Neil B. Wiseman, *The Heart of A Great Pastor: How to Grow Strong and Thrive Wherever God Has Planted You* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1994) , 20.

so, read on and evaluate the insights of a pair of **hopeful cynics!**”³⁴ These authors categorize themselves as hopeful cynics, always hopeful in the promises of God to bring revival and reform but cynical as to whether current church people will repent, humble themselves, and desire the necessary change that institutional ministry needs to make. Over the past eight years, a pride and arrogance can be easily discerned among the people in United Methodist churches this writer has served. It was hard to find a humble spirit among congregational leaders, especially those leaders enmeshed in power and control.

Fourth, the project does not represent in any manner, implied or explicitly, an anti-institutional predisposition. According to Missional professor Darrell Guder, “There is no continuation of the Christian movement within history without institutional forms and patterns.”³⁵ He makes the point that a local church needs to express itself in a variety of organizational forms. Problems occur when the institutional church takes precedent over God’s mission in the world or when the survival of a local congregation takes precedent over the mission. Problems also occur when ministry takes the form of “business” models in perpetuating the heritage of a local church. Evangelism, for instance, becomes reduced to recruiting members or an official program sanctioned by the denomination. The Gospel then gets reduced to a sales pitch and conquest.

Easum further elaborates, “The problem with the present form of institutional religion is that for the most part it has reduced God to a manageable number of programs, structures, budgets, and, of course, the outcome is institutional survival.”³⁶ Missional

³⁴Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) , xi. Bold emphasis by the author.

³⁵Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series, General Editor Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) , 185.

³⁶Bill Easum, *Unfreezing Moves: Following Jesus Into the Mission Field* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001) , 34.

professor Howard Snyder adds, “It is hard to escape the conclusion that one of the greatest roadblocks to the gospel of Jesus Christ today is the institutional church.”³⁷ King’s College (London) professor Pete Ward writes that institutional churches have become “solid,” a descriptor used for those local churches that have shifted “toward structures, institutions, and meetings.”³⁸ Many writings by pastors, futurists, scholars, seminary and college teachers illustrate the contemporary spiritual, theological, and ecclesial problems faced today by many churches. This cloud of witnesses point to the reality that God’s Church has drifted from participating in God’s mission, thereby reducing what it means to be the body of Christ as a missional people being sent out into the mission field to a people inside a building who are trying to maintain the church’s heritage, or trying to maintain the church as a refuge from postmodern culture. Consequently, the dying church becomes no different from an empty museum where relics of the past are placed.

Summary

This chapter has set forth important prolegomena. The origins of the project and the thesis with core aims were identified. The importance of congregational reform centers on two fundamental questions that need to be asked by every congregation. However, specific challenges and limitations face leaders and congregations who head down the pathway of congregational reform. Resistance by current church members will be stressful. The chapter also included an assessment of key working assumptions that

³⁷Howard Snyder, *Radical Wesley: The Problem of Wineskins Today* (Houston: Torch Publications, 1996) , 23.

³⁸Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2002) , 2.

shape the project and thesis. Finally, an overview identified the overall direction of the project along with the setting in which the project occurs.

The second chapter will provide a definition of culture, present a historical survey of cultural movement through human history, and conclude with a working definition of postmodernism. Chapter three will focus on the essential features of postmodernism and provide an evaluation of the postmodern world. Chapter four will focus on statistical research that identifies the present condition of the congregation and the Nebraska Conference in the United Methodist Church. The leadership survey will add additional data from which to draw conclusions. Chapter five will lay the biblical and theological foundations for culture, ministry, leadership, church, and mission. Chapter six will identify the overall design of the leadership conference along with the foundational teaching that will be presented in the conversations. The teaching ideas from this chapter will be formatted for a slideshow presentation. Chapter seven will provide the outcomes of the conference and conclusions.

CHAPTER 2

CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS

Foundation One: Culture

What is culture? The word *culture* is a difficult concept to define. No consensus has ever existed regarding any standardized or formalized definition or meaning. A cursory survey of the conceptual history of the word reveals a broad-range of meanings, varying from narrow to broad definitions and understandings. The narrow understanding limits culture to “high culture” in the sense of the fine arts. The broad understanding extends culture to include societal behaviors and patterns of behavior among people groups.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (United States Department of Justice) defines culture as “The shared values, traditions, norms, customs, arts, history, institutions, and experience of a group of people. The group may be identified by race, age, ethnicity, language, national origin, religion, or other social categories or groupings.”¹ This represents a broad and dynamic understanding of culture, which is directly opposite to Victorian poet Matthew Arnold’s (1822-88) narrow, selective and unyielding understanding in which he viewed culture as a manifestation of the elite “high” culture. For him, culture was “the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known, and

¹Bureau of Justice Assistance, “Glossary,” (Washington D.C.: United States Department of Justice, 2007), http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/evaluation/glossary/glossary_c.htm. (accessed July 31, 2005).

said in the world, and thus with the history of the human spirit.”² The problem becomes who defines “best.”

Between the Bureau of Justice Assistance’s and Matthew Arnold’s views, many present-day definitions exist, depending upon the social theorist, cultural anthropologist, or Department of Anthropology. The University of Manitoba’s Department of Cultural Anthropology provides a dynamic, working (in the sense of a starting point) definition: “The system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning.”³

Today, culture often refers to (1) “the intellectual spiritual, aesthetic development of an individual, group, or society”; (2) “a range of intellectual and artistic activities”; and (3) “the entire way of life, activities, beliefs, and customs of a people, group, or society.”⁴

The difficulty of establishing any consensual definition centers on the variety of dimensions within the concept itself. There is a topical element, which focuses on categories or groups. There is a historical dimension, which focuses on heritage or tradition. There is a behavioral aspect, which focuses on human manners and conduct. There is a normative dimension, which focuses on values and rules for living. There is a functional component, which focuses on the social and individual issues of how people live together. There is a mental dimension, which focuses on distinctions between human

²Matthew Arnold, “Culture and Anarchy,” ch 1, as quoted in Robert Andrews, *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) , 206.

³Washington State University, ‘Definitions & Discussions of Culture,’ (Pullman, WA: Washington State University, 2002), <http://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/anthropology/courses/122/module1/culture.html>. (accessed July 31, 2005). This comes from the work of John H. Bodley, “An Anthropological Perspective” from *Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States, and the Global System*, 1994, 3

⁴Philip Smith, *Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) , 2.

beings and animals. There is a structural element, which focuses on unified patterns of behavior. There is a symbolic aspect, which focuses on shared meanings by peoples and people groups.⁵ Because each dimension can produce a myriad of definitions, no formalized or consensual definition can easily exist today.

For the purpose of this project-thesis, the University of Manitoba's definition of culture will be used because it is a definition that incorporates the aforementioned dimensions and emphasizes the "learned" aspect of culture. In other words, culture is learned. This definition is also a broad understanding, which is necessary because people and people groups are complex in nature, beliefs, and behavior. For example, the people group called "church" is extremely complex. Currently, people across North America live in a variety of "church" groups: Roman Catholic, United Methodist, Episcopal, Berean, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Evangelical Free, Foursquare Gospel, Assemblies of God, Church of the Brethren, Baptist, Church of the Nazarene, and many more. The existence of these "church" or family groups in sundry denominations points to the complexity of human beings attempting to live out faithfully their life in Christ.

Consequently, narrow definitions of culture will not suffice in providing any satisfactory understanding for the complex web of human relationships and experiences in human life, especially in the context of human sinfulness. Any narrow definition would reduce human relationships and experiences to simplistic categories and understandings. Human beings are more complex than any single interpretation can describe and assess. In other words, human beings cannot be reduced to one category of

⁵University of Manitoba, "The Concept of Culture: A Definition of Culture," Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada: University of Manitoba, 2005), <http://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/anthropology/Courses/122/module1/culture.html>. (accessed July 31, 2005).

evaluation or analysis. Therefore, *culture* as an interpretive schema needs to be broad and dynamic in definition.

Academic scholars agree that human history has experienced four major cultural movements: ancient, medieval, modern, and postmodern. These scholars differ on the exact date when each cultural movement began and ended. It remains highly unlikely that any consensus will ever be attained regarding dates. Despite this limitation, this helpful organizational structure of human history provides a scheme to better understand human history. Each cultural movement reveals different approaches to epistemology, authority, understanding, and communication. Through each generation of God's church, these differences impacted missional strategies and continue to do so today.

The Ancient Cultural Movement roughly extends from 2,500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. The Medieval Cultural Movement extends from 500 C.E. – 1500 C.E. The Modern Cultural Movement extends from 1500 C.E. to 2000 and beyond. (The remnant of modern philosophy continues as the new view of reality emerges.) The Postmodern Cultural Movement extends from 2000 and beyond.⁶

While a useful historical construct to think critically about ministry and the mission of God's church today, perhaps it might be best to see the new view of culture as an emerging view in order to provide a more dynamic interpretation since postmodernism continues to morph and change so quickly. For the purpose of this project, this typology of human history as a paradigm will be used, with the caveat that no paradigm provides a definitive view or analysis. This author agrees with Dave Tomlinson, vicar of St. Luke's Anglican Church (North London) who writes: "Because paradigms are imperfect human

⁶Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 44.

constructions, and because no paradigm allows humans to see everything as it really is, paradigms are ill-equipped to handle every anomaly or inconsistency.”⁷ This is especially so for postmodernism or postmodern culture.

What this cultural paradigm can do is help church leaders, members, and friends of the church begin discussing the contemporary culture in which the church lives and ministers, and help them ask better questions about ministry. It is important to remember that the church as God’s people in any historical setting is embedded in a specific time, in a specific place, and in a specific culture, as is the gospel. As missiologist Leslie Newbigin correctly points out, “There can never be a culture-free gospel.”⁸

This author affirms the need to see human history through an interpretive lens of historical, cultural movements. However, this author also understands the limitation of historical periodization. Professor of Congregation Mission Craig Van Gelder (Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota) writes, “There is a tendency among some of the theorists to use periodization of history as the basis of establishing the postmodern paradigm, but this flies in the face of the underlying assumption that all periodizations are subject to deconstruction.”⁹ Generalizations of any historical time period fail to describe in full detail all the salient features of human life. Human history – history filled with broken, wounded and sinful people – is too complex to be reduced to normative descriptions.

⁷Dave Tomlinson, *The Post Evangelical*, revised North American ed., with a forward by Dallas Willard (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003) , 91.

⁸Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986) , 4.

⁹Craig van Gelder, “Postmodernism as An Emerging Worldview,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 26 (1991) : 416.

With this caveat, descriptive and evaluative analysis can be used to help church leaders and members see how the emerging, postmodern culture continues to create North America as a new and large mission field and to help them see themselves as missionaries, which requires new ways of biblically and theologically critically thinking about postmodern culture, the gospel, and mission upon biblical and theological foundations. Below is a chart that break downs each cultural movement.

Figure 2.1

Cultural Major World Shifts¹⁰

	Ancient	Medieval	Modern	Postmodern
Epistemology & Belief	Regional worldview. Deities: considered regional and territorial.	Judeo-Christian, God-centered	Shift to human-centered trust in reason to discover truth	Self-determined, pluralistic view of culture and religion. Conflicting truths and beliefs are accepted.
Understanding	Power and faith were in the kings, empires, and local deities.	Power and faith were in the church.	Power and faith were in human reasoning, science, and logic.	Power and faith is in the personal experience.
Communication	Oral	Manuscript and Oral	Print	Image and Media
Authority	In oracles, poets, kings, and prophets	In the Bible (but only as taught by the church)	In reason, science, and logic	Suspicious of authority. Bible is one of many religious writings.
Theme	“What is man that you are mindful of him?” -- Psalm 8:4	“I believe in order that I may understand.” – Anselm (1033-1099)	“I think, therefore I am.” – Descartes (1596-1650)	“If it makes you happy, it can’t be that bad.” – Sheryl Crow

¹⁰Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 44. This author has used and adapted Kimball’s chart, who adapted his chart from Leadership Network (www.leadnet.com) with input from Brian McClaren.

Foundation Two: Postmodernism

As difficult as the word *culture* is to define, the words *postmodernism* and *postmodernity* are equally complex because numerous meanings can be used to describe the reality of the postmodern culture. Scholars differentiate between postmodernism and postmodernity. Whereas postmodernism refers to “the intellectual formulation of postmodern ideas on the high end of culture,”¹¹ postmodernity refers to “the popular, social expression of the same assumptions but in ways that may be unselfconscious and often not intellectual at all...”¹² Postmodernism’s intellectual expression comes through the thinking and writings of Michel Foucault, Paul de Man, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, Jean Francois Lyotard, and others. Postmodernity’s cultural expression comes through popular culture, especially through films like *Blade Runner*, *Terminator*, *Blue Velvet*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*, the *Matrix* trilogy.

Ethics and Christian Apologetics professor R. Scott Smith provides a helpful overview of the distinctions between postmodernism and postmodernity, which he identifies as “street” postmodernism.¹³ Four characteristics of street postmodernism emerge from culture. Citing Watergate and incidents involving former president Bill Clinton as contemporary, political examples, Smith sees street postmodernism manifesting itself as “suspicion of authorities’ claims.”¹⁴ Other examples emerge from the twentieth century include the killing fields of Cambodia, Stalin’s reign in Communist Russia, the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, and various environmental emergencies.

Postmodernists (followers of postmodern philosophy, values, or ethics) are suspicious

¹¹David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in A Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005) , 64.

¹²Ibid.

¹³R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005) , 17.

¹⁴Ibid.

because preservation of political or ruling power remains at the heart of all ruling authorities.

Another street characteristic is a “deep suspicion of hierarchies.”¹⁵ Smith cites the Roman Catholic Church as a religious hierarchy which postmodernists and feminists criticize. However, all Christian denominations in postmodern reality face postmodern criticism – whether such critique is fair or unfair. This postmodern criticism of suspicion extends beyond religious institutions to include all institutions: government, corporate, legal, or educational.

A third emerging postmodern theme from the street is a “distrust of modern science.”¹⁶ According to Smith, this distrust has emerged through human history by the efforts of scientists, as exemplified by the Nazi regime and the development of nuclear weapons. Postmodernists recognize that scientists do not always care about the common good for humanity because scientists, like politicians, are susceptible to abusing power.

Finally, Smith identifies authenticity as an essential feature of street postmodernism. He writes, “they are looking for ‘authentic’ people. They do not want just promises; they are looking for people whose lives and deeds match up with their words.”¹⁷ Postmodernists are seeking for authentic, genuine relationships, and the place to find them are in communities.

Suspicion of authority, suspicion of hierarchy, distrust of modern science, and the search for authentic relationships are hallmarks of street postmodernism, according to Smith. These features differ from what he calls “academic postmodernism” which

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., 18.

focuses more on the epistemological, metaphysical, and language foundations.¹⁸ In other words, intellectual postmodernism centers on philosophical foundations upon which suspicion, cynicism, and distrust emerge. For Smith, epistemological inquiry asks, “What can human beings really know”? Metaphysical inquiry asks, “What really exists”?

For this project, this author will refer to postmodernism (street and academic) and postmodernity interchangeably because the ideas of postmodernism do filter into society through all forms of expression in popular culture even though most people will never read French and American postmodern philosophers or intellectuals. Also used interchangeably with postmodernism will be the descriptive phrases *postmodern world*, *postmodern culture*, and *postmodern condition*.

“What is postmodernism? Is it a lifestyle? Is it a specific artistic discipline? Is it a philosophy? Is it an intellectual movement? Is it “a general orientation, as a way of apprehending and experiencing the world and our place, or placelessness, in it?”¹⁹ Is it any of these things? Is it a historical age? Is it a cultural reaction? In the spirit of (constructive) postmodernism, the best answer is, “It depends.” Historical Theology professor Michael Horton elaborates: “To an architect, sculptor, painter, or novelist, it may be the reaction against the International Style and High Modern art and literature; to political theorists, it’s the end of utopian ideologies; to philosophers, a transition from Cartesian foundationalism; and to economists, the shift from an industrial to an information economy in capitalism’s global phase.”²⁰ Horton’s comment correctly shows

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Todd Gitlin, “Postmodernism: What Are They Talking About” in Arthur Asa Berger, ed., *The Postmodern Presence: Readings on Postmodernism in American Culture and Society* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), 60.

²⁰Michael Horton, “Better Homes & Gardens” in *The Church in Emerging Culture*, General ed. Leonard Sweet (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 105.

that no unified, single definition exists because each perspective forms a particular or contextualized view of postmodernism.

Constructing a definition (which is atypical of the postmodern ethos) of postmodernism is a difficult task because postmodernism means something different to each academic area. “Defining the idea of postmodernism is a bit like nailing down Jell-O. Its amorphous shape and elasticity allow it to pop out in places one might not expect.”²¹ Supporting this view, Broadcast and Electronic Communication professor Arthur Asa Berger writes, “Postmodernism is like a piece of wet soap that keeps slipping out of your hands.”²²

What unifies all areas which this cultural and philosophical phenomenon of postmodernism affects is “the common realization that there has been a fundamental shift within modern western culture.”²³ Some scholars, however, understand postmodernism as it pertains to its continuous relationship with modernity. For these scholars, a continuous relationship exists between postmodernism and modernism. Comparative Literature professor Frederic Jameson sees postmodernism as a late stage of capitalism,²⁴ whereas Theology and Ethics professor Thomas Oden views postmodernism as a fully evolved form of modernity: “ultra-modernity”²⁵ Old Testament professor J. Richard Middleton and University of Toronto chaplain Brian Walsh write, “In a fundamental sense, then, the postmodern is a continuance and *intensification* of (one aspect of) the modern... We could

²¹Gary Philips, “Religious Pluralism in A Postmodern World” in David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Bridgepoint, 2001) , 131.

²²Berger, *The Portable Postmodernist*, vii.

²³Van Gelder, “Postmodernism as An Emerging Worldview,” 413.

²⁴See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

²⁵Thomas C. Oden, “The Death of Modernity and Postmodern Evangelical Spirituality” in David S. Dockery, ed. *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 2d ed (Grand Rapids, MI: BridgepointBooks, 2001) , 26.

say it is *hypermodern* or *ultramodern*.²⁶ Perspectives such as Jameson, Oden, Middleton and Walsh accentuate the connection between modernism and postmodernism, although postmodernism will intensify and normalize these themes from modernism or the modern period. English professor Ihab Hassan sums up the relationship well: “Modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or a Chinese Wall.”²⁷

In contrast to a continuous relationship between modernism and postmodernism, French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests a different relationship: a nascent relationship. He suggests that postmodernism “is undoubtedly a part of the modern” but “is not modernism and its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.”²⁸ For Lyotard, postmodernism is an emerging form of modernism. In emphasizing this nascent relationship, Philosophical and Theological professor Myron Penner identifies that “Lyotard therefore places postmodernity logically prior to, and ever-present with, modernity as the source of modern anxiety and its central problematic.”²⁹

No matter what view one takes regarding the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, many scholars – social historians and cultural anthropologists, language and media theorists – recognize that the cultural milieu in Western Europe and North America has changed, keeps changing and thus is always emerging and morphing into new forms. Postmodernism is emerging, but what comes next is impossible to determine.

²⁶J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995) , 41 – 42.

²⁷Ihab Hassan, “Toward A Concept of Postmodernism” in Thomas Docherty, ed. *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) , 149.

²⁸Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*. Theory and History of Literature, vol. 10. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, with a foreword by Frederic Jameson. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979) , 79.

²⁹Myron B. Penner, “Introduction” in Myron B. Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005) , 19.

The answer to “What is postmodernism?” will require continuing reflection into the relationship between modernity and postmodernity because, as Oden correctly points out, “it would be wrongheaded to infer that very aspect of modern consciousness is dead or that all social and political achievements of the last two centuries are lost. Modernity is not dead in the sense that all its repercussions and consequences are over.”³⁰ In agreement with Oden, the remnant of modernity remains in contemporary culture and is not dead because there are still shared characteristics (e.g., nihilistic philosophy and religious pluralism) between the two views of reality. Postmodernism has simply increased the intensity and normalcy of these shared characteristics.

For example, shared features between modernism and postmodernism, according to English professor Gary Eberle, includes emotional and psychiatric fragmentation of identity, fast-paced living of life, and alienation of social and family relationships. This fragmented, fast-paced, and alienated condition is not unique among postmodern people, for modern people also experienced these breakdowns. What makes experiencing these three breakdowns different between postmodern and modern persons is the normalcy of them. Eberle writes, “It [postmodernism] becomes a state of mind in which the fast pace, alienation, and fragmentation of modernization are no longer upsetting...but are rather seen as normal even inevitable.”³¹ Modernity still held on to essential foundations or fundamentals in life, whether these foundations were epistemological, ethical, moral, or religious even though the breakdown of them was beginning. Nevertheless, the modern view would not have seen fragmentation, alienation, and fast-paced living as normal or

³⁰Thomas C. Oden, “So What Happens after Modernity? A Postmodern Agenda for Evangelical Theology” in David S. Dockery, ed. *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: BridgepointBooks, 2001) , 187.

³¹Gary Eberle, *The Geography of Nowhere: Finding One’s Self in the Postmodern World* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1994) , 19.

expected, which the postmodern view does. Eberle elaborates, “the new worldview [postmodernism] , if you can call it such, says fragmentation, fast-pace and alienation are all about what we can expect, and, in the final analysis, are about all there is.”³²

A definition does provide a critical point of entry into cultural conversation and biblical and theological reflection on postmodernism. When it comes to “defining” postmodernism, as if any historical and cultural age, condition, or movement could be accurately and precisely defined, a dynamic definition with less precision is to be preferred. Postmodernism is “a complex set of reactions to modern philosophy and its presuppositions, rather than to any agreement of substantive doctrines or philosophical questions.”³³ The key concept is *reactions*. Postmodernism, in toto, seems to be reacting against modernism and its scientific totalizing views of reality, truth, and knowledge, whether the reaction comes from art, literary criticism, philosophy, or epistemology. (For schematic and detailed reactions, see Appendix 2 for Dr. Larry Solomon’s comparison chart and Appendix 3 for Dr. Ihab Hassan’s chart.)

The rise of the modern period or modernity was distinguished by prominent characteristics which created beliefs about human beings, people’s worldview, ethics, knowledge, philosophy, and religion. In the end, as Ethics professor Stanley Grenz points out, modernity has “absolute faith in human rational capabilities.”³⁴ Nevertheless, modernity profoundly shaped life across Europe and North America. Modernity’s philosophical implications influenced society for a great many years until signs of slow but increasing decline began emerging in the ninetieth and twentieth centuries. With the

³²Ibid., 17.

³³*Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “postmodernism.”

³⁴Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996) , 4.

rise of postmodernism, the pace of modernity's decline accelerated. Missiologist Diogenes Allen cites evidence of modernity's breakdown: (1) "the idea of God is superfluous"; (2) "a failure to find a basis for morality and society"; (3) "belief in inevitable progress"; and (4) "knowledge is inevitably good."³⁵

Allen's evidence of modernity's breakdown as a dominating intellectual and philosophical philosophy reflects dominant motifs: the divorce of God out of all areas of life, the breakdown of personal and social morality, the idea of positive progress in society, and that knowledge will be used in a good and helpful manner to the benefit of humanity. In another view, Capo Beach Calvary pastor Chuck Smith Jr. sees six dominant motifs emerging from the modern period: (1) "thinking sought to replace faith in God with human reason"; (2) "new and important role" of science; (3) "science was assumed to be capable of revealing the whole truth about the universe"; (4) "science became more secular"; (5) "inherent humanism of modernity became more prominent"; and (6) elevation of the "single individual."³⁶ In agreement with Allen, Smith Jr. sees modernity as a dominant ideology slowly breaking down.

Theology professor Millard Erickson, following Religion and Philosophy professor David Ray Griffin, sees four forms or approaches to postmodernism: deconstruction, liberationist, constructive, and restorationist.³⁷ Deconstruction postmodernism represents the radical form in which all foundations -- social, religious, epistemological, truth, language, and even reality are rejected, or at minimum

³⁵Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in A Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989) , 3-6.

³⁶Chuck Smith Jr., *The End of the World As We Know It* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001) , 18 – 20.

³⁷See Millard J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993) , 99 – 103; and David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee; Joe Holland *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989) , 1 – 7.

conditionally believed. For instance, “Language does not refer to objective objects as its referents: words refer to only other words.”³⁸ The signifier – the word – becomes separated from the signified (meaning or concept). In the postmodern world, words by themselves only take on meaning through social construction. In other words, meaning of words is approved through the social community, which determines the interpretation.

Liberationist postmodernism “focuses more on the social and political form of the contemporary worldview rather than philosophical foundation.”³⁹ Griffin cites Harvey Cox and Cornell West as examples of postmodern liberationists view, which also includes feminist and Majority World voices.

Constructive postmodernism “attempts to revise or reconstruct the modern worldview.”⁴⁰ Griffin cites William Beardsley and himself from the Protestant tradition and Joe Holland from the Roman Catholic tradition as prime examples of constructive postmodernists who see it still possible to construct a worldview. This position rejects modernism’s metaphysical foundations of truth and knowledge.

Restorationist postmodernism “suggests that there is much with both the premodern and modern perspectives worth retaining.”⁴¹ Griffin cites Roman Catholic George William Rutler and Lutheran Richard John Neuhaus who follow this form of postmodernism. This position rejects modernism tendencies toward relativism, subjectivism, reductionism, scientism, consumerism, and individualism.

Another schematic view is offered by Missiologist professor Michael Pocock, who sees four categories of postmodernists: reluctant, resentful, reconstructive, and

³⁸David S. Dockery, “The Challenge of Postmodernism” in David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Bridgepoint, 2001) , 15.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

reemerging.⁴² Reluctant postmodernists “admit modernity did not deliver on its implicit or stated promises – but they wish it had.”⁴³ While recognizing that modernity holds no answers to transcendental questions, these postmodernists hold on to reason and science with a clinging hope to answer many social and personal problems. Next, the resentful postmodernists “are angry that modernity became an exploitative culture – and individuality – crushing machine.”⁴⁴ These postmodernists hold on to a skeptical and nihilistic outlook and tend to deconstruct concepts and ideas. No universal metanarrative or worldview exists.

The third postmodernist grouping is reconstructive postmodernists. These postmodernists “are hopeful that a new paradigm is out there.”⁴⁵ These people are looking for something that works, even though the possibility seems desolate because no grand story or interpretive framework exists. Pocock goes on to describe them as “pluralistic and dialogue oriented.”⁴⁶ The final class of postmodernists is reemerging. These postmodernists “are people who have been thoroughly immersed in postmodern belief and culture but have found it lacking.”⁴⁷ Pocock cites Bono of U2 as a cultural example of this class of postmodernists.

What emerges from Erickson’s and Pocock’s classifications is a diverse and eclectic group of people, who are camped intellectually in postmodernism and who are amorphous in shape and thus easily defy specific and normative categories. In other words, postmodernists come in many shapes and forms. The image of postmodernists

⁴²Michael Pocock, “The Changing Basis of Knowledge: From Modernity to Postmodernity” in Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005) , 112 – 113.

⁴³Ibid., 112.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

will always be elusive. While it is helpful to utilize Erickson and Pocock to critically think about contemporary culture and missional engagement with people in a postmodern world, clear and precise identities of postmodernists must necessarily be vague.

Summary

This chapter has set forth important conceptual foundations to enter into conversation with people living in contemporary culture, known by many as postmodern culture. What is initially required for conversation to begin is a primary understanding of what is meant by the word *culture*. Rather than comprehending culture with a narrow definition, it remains most helpful (and hopeful) to have a broad understanding because people and people groups are complex and sinful. The University of Manitoba's definition provides such a helpful definition.

With a dynamic viewpoint of culture, one can see the broad cultural movements throughout human history which have come to be described as ancient, medieval, modern, and postmodern. These four historical and cultural paradigms have important limitations; however, these cultural movements remain helpful in initiating and engaging in conversation with people who are formed and shaped from generation to generation.

Postmodernism in reacting to modernity's assumptions about knowledge, progress, and science which has changed contemporary culture and the way people view reality from epistemology (how do human beings know) to communication (how to human beings communicate). Consequently, assumptions from modern times have been breaking down and evolving forms of postmodernism continue to emerge. What final form, if any, postmodernism will emerge into remains open to philosophical debate.

What is not open to debate is the profound shaping influence of postmodernism upon all people, especially youth who have been born since the 1960s.

CHAPTER 3

POSTMODERNISM

Voices of Postmodernism

French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard understands postmodern culture through the loss of metanarratives or totalizing views of reality. For him, postmodernism is “incredulity toward metanarratives.”¹ He sees postmodern culture (Western European and North America) as a multi-dimensional reaction to all forms of metanarratives (institutional, philosophical, social, or religious) that present a totalizing view which is universal and absolute. Consequently, Lyotard’s thought opens the door to relativistic implications that impact all areas of life: beliefs, ethics, religion, truth, knowledge, ethics, social morality etc. No area which gives existential meaning to an individual’s life remains untouched by the social, ethical, religious, and moral reactions of postmodern culture because the postmodern ethos, even the most relativistic, permeates society through visual and sound media (e.g., television, film, fashion, advertising).

English professor Kevin Hart calls for a “close” reading of Lyotard to genuinely understand what he means by metanarrative. In discussing the Bible, Hart maintains that the metanarrative as shown through the biblical narrative is something **different** than what Lyotard argues against. He writes, “what Jean-Francois Lyotard has in mind when

¹Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 10, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, with a foreword by Frederic Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979) , xxiv.

he talks about sciences that employ grand narratives. These are distinctively modern discourses that seek to legitimate themselves by appealing to fables that purport to explain everything and that promises progress.”² Nowhere, as Hart points out, is the word *progress* in the Bible. An essential feature of modernism is the idea that human history is marching toward a time in which all the evils in the world will be eliminated. Lyotard rejects such a notion. Progress and (Christian) hope are not interchangeable. In rejecting scientific metanarratives or grand stories, Lyotard is refuting the claims of modern science: progress is inevitable, knowledge is inherently good, and truth will be “discovered” through scientific methodologies and approaches by the autonomous self or discoverer. The “truth is out there to be discovered” represents the modern view of life, whereas the “truth is socially constructed” view characterizes the radical postmodern views. Lyotard cannot accept any scientific philosophy that searches for objective truth, objective reality. There are simply no scientific metanarrative that can fully describe reality of human existence, according to Lyotard.

Philosophy professor James K. A. Smith, like Hart, also calls for a “close” reading of Lyotard’s understanding of “incredulity toward metanarratives” because Christian thinkers and interpreters or critics have misinterpreted Lyotard’s meaning of metanarrative. He writes, “For Lyotard, the term *metanarrative* [grand récit] does not simply refer to a ‘grand story’ in the sense of stories that have grand or universal pretensions, or even make universal claims.”³ Smith goes on to say that Lyotard held a different meaning which had to do with the nature of the claims, not the scope. “For

²Kevin Hart, *Postmodernism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford, England: Onesworld Publications, 2004) , 90.

³James K. A. Smith, “A Little Story about Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, and Postmodernism” in Myron B. Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005) , 124.

Lyotard, metanarratives are a distinctively *modern* phenomenon: they are stories which not only tell a grand story (since even premodern and tribal stories do this), but also claim to be able to *legitimate* the story and its claims *by an appeal to universal Reason*.”⁴

According to Smith, the basis of misinterpreting Lyotard’s view of metanarratives by various Christian thinkers and philosophers centers on legitimization and (scientific) reason.⁵ For Lyotard, modern, scientific metanarratives tell overarching stories which legitimize themselves through scientific reason. What Lyotard is rejecting is the tendency of modern metanarratives to rightfully validate their own claims by appealing to their own universal language of autonomous reason and thus stand as universal “truth” for all people. In other words, the incredulity toward metanarratives by Lyotard centers on the epistemological foundation that no modern metanarrative is free from bias. There is always a baseline credo in all modern or scientific metanarratives. Therefore, Lyotard has a specific understanding of metanarratives: “appeals to criteria of legitimization that are understood as standing outside any particular language game and thus guarantee ‘universal’ truth.”⁶

The Christian metanarrative, in Smith’s interpretation of Lyotard, does not qualify as a metanarrative in Lyotard’s thought because the Christian story neither legitimizes itself nor basis itself upon scientific reasoning. The Christian story is different from metanarratives that Lyotard critiques. The Christian story can be a voice in an authentic voice in the postmodern world, and postmodernism can be an ally of Christian belief.

⁴Ibid., 125.

⁵James K. A. Smith cites J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh (*Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in A Postmodern Age*) and Stanley Grenz (*Primer on Postmodernism*) as examples of Christian thinkers who misinterpret Lyotard. For detailed examination, see Smith, “A Little Story about Metanarratives,” pages 125 – 128.

⁶Smith, “A Little Story about Metanarratives,” 130.

Smith writes, “I think that ‘Christian philosophers’ – whose faith is an integral aspect of their philosophy and their philosophizing – should find in Lyotard’s critique of metanarrative and autonomous Reason an ally that opens up the space for a radically Christian philosophy.”⁷

Another way to describe postmodernism(s) is through visual images. French cultural critic Jean Baudrillard sees postmodernism as characterized by “simulacrum”⁸ by which he means, explains Geography professor David Harvey, as “a state of near perfect replication that the difference between the original and the copy becomes almost impossible to spot.”⁹ In other words, images as experienced through film, television, and amusement parks have replaced what is real in culture. For Baudrillard, Disneyland serves as a prime example of a simulated reality in which “is there to conceal the fact that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America, which is Disneyland.”¹⁰ Reality has changed in this postmodern of hyperreal presence. An essential – normative, social reality – has changed due to all the presence of hyperreal imagery. The experience of real only comes through simulacrum, which only distances from the real. Baudrillard sees mass media as playing a central role in fostering this cultural change. Feminist Linda Hutcheon describes his argument this way: “the mass media have neutralized reality by stages: first

⁷Smith, “A Little Story about Metanarratives,” 133. Even with a critical understanding of Lyotard’s thought through Smith, epistemological foundations still remain problematic. Even though Christian belief is not a metanarrative in Lyotard’s sense, relativistic implications remain in the areas of epistemology, truth, religion. For instance, how does a person know what is real since each conversation about reality is a language game inside a particular community? Is there a place for universal truth for all people? This author approaches Lyotard with a balanced approach, recognizing that Lyotard offers some necessary cultural critique but questions how much of an ally that Lyotard’s postmodern thinking can be toward Christian belief.

⁸Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchmann (United States: Semiotext(e)), 12.

⁹David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 289.

¹⁰Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 25.

they *reflected* it; then they *masked* and perverted it; next they had to mask its *absence*; and finally they produced instead the *simulacrum* of the real, the destruction of meaning and of all relation to reality.”¹¹ In a postmodern sense, the fake has become more real than the real.

The Truman Show is an example of a film that questions the nature of reality, asking what is real and what is not real. This film, starring Jim Carrey, tells the story of Truman Burbank whose life is false or fake. He lives his life as real when in reality the place where he lives is a studio set. Truman’s friends and people around him are actors who play a role. He goes about living his ordinary life and has no idea that everything around him is fake. He lives in a contrived, illusionary world in which he goes from one staged scene to the next. He alone lives in this reality, for all others know it is a fake reality. Truman alone thinks that he is an ordinary man with an ordinary life and has no idea about how he is being exploited.

As the movie progresses, mistakes happen that begin to breakdown the reality programming in which he has lived. Truman begins to figure out that his surroundings are fake – fully staged scenes and events which are monitored and controlled to keep him from perceiving what is real. In reality, he is a prisoner of this television illusion. As he discovers the falsity of his illusionary life, he faces the question of whether he would prefer the safety of the illusionary world or the danger of the real world. This question also faces the viewing audience as well. Will human beings prefer the illusionary reality created by media’s (Hollywood, television, broadcast news, newspapers) perception of reality or authentic reality? Baudrillard asks necessary and critical questions about what

¹¹Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002) , 31.

is real or not real? His idea of simulacrum leads to core philosophical questions about life in the postmodern world.

Baudrillard's conception of the postmodern world remains open to necessary criticism. Hutcheon, who sees the postmodern world through architecture, identifies three areas of criticism: "metaphysical idealism," "nostalgia for pre-mass media authenticity," and "apocalyptic nihilism."¹² While not intimating that nothing is ever real, the force of Baudrillard's argument does seem to support the notion of apocalyptic nihilism, as Hutcheon correctly points out. How can any person ever experience anything as real except through simulacrum? Is there any unmediated access to reality outside of what is constructed through visual imagery?

The answer to the aforementioned question by contemporary media theorists is that there is no way to know reality outside of visual imagery. Media theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff writes:

Modern life takes place onscreen. Life in industrial countries is increasingly lived under constant video surveillance from cameras in buses and shopping malls, on highways and bridges, and next to ATM cash machines. More and more people look back, using devices ranging from traditional cameras to camcorders and Webcams. At the same time, work and leisure are increasingly centered on visual media, from computers to Digital Video Disks. Human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before from the satellite picture to medical images of the interior of the human body. In the era of the visual screen, your viewpoint is crucial. For most people in the United States, life is mediated through television and, to a lesser extent, film.¹³

What Mirzoeff describes for modernity is more so for postmodernity because of the increasing experience of the image in all areas of life. Generations will now be born into the various forms of visual imagery as it shapes postmodern living. Regarding the

¹²Ibid., 31.

¹³Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999) , 1.

dominance of the visual image, Mirzoeff writes, “Most theorists of the postmodern agree that one of its distinctive features is the dominance of the image.”¹⁴ Everyday life continues to be surrounded by images, and people will choose to experience reality through them. The scope of people’s experience will be global in which images from the world will come to people through film, television, and the Internet. People across planet earth will be connected as a global people, who share some sort of connectedness

Just exactly what the nature of this “connectedness” remains open to cultural and philosophical discussion. One area of critique centers on the nature of what it means to be connected. In other words, what is the core essence of the global connection among people and people groups? This global connection can take many forms: national or political in the sense of country of origin, governmental in the sense of democracy, economic in the sense of consumer economy, cultural in the sense of common humanity, religious in the sense of spirituality, technological in the sense of online and global communication, or media in the sense of image or visual. Do any of these really create relationship or connection? A deeper question is, “Are any of these forms connection at all?” Yet another question is, “How are relationships formed in a postmodern world?” Additional philosophical, biblical, and theological critique on these and other crucial questions is needed to evaluate the real nature of how people are connected globally in postmodern times. Films like *The Truman Show* draw people into the conversation about postmodern life and living about what is real and not real. Films like this one asks – not coerces – viewers to question the nature of reality with necessary and penetrating questions that engage and mind and emotions. Without the engagement of both mind and heart, reflective and critiquing questions lose their power to change people.

¹⁴Ibid., 9.

Descriptions of Postmodernism

What does postmodernism look like? Another question is what are the salient features (as opposed to foundations or essentials) of postmodernism? A third question: what is the nature of postmodernism? All three questions attempt to discern how postmodernism is emerging in North America. There are no consensual answers to those three questions, much less definitive answers. A kaleidoscope of thoughts exists in regards to postmodern culture.

Christian futurist Leonard Sweet understands postmodern culture through ten “life rings” which are “improbably plausible scenarios and future hot spots that are more than extrapolations but less than speculations.”¹⁵ These life rings point to the new cultural and social reality that has been caused by the emergence of postmodernism. For Sweet, postmodern culture has hit the social and religious landscape of North America with the force of a tsunami. In using water imagery, Sweet recognizes that a spiritual tidal wave has hit American society, and every area of human life has been impacted, including religious life in local churches. He sees that local churches can deny this reality, take refuge in heritage by bunkering in, or ride the tsunami wave. Churches have imminent, critical decisions to make about this new cultural environment. “The church must transition its ministries beyond a ‘church growth’ mentality into a ‘church health’ mentality. The promise of the gospel is not ‘growth’. The promise is health—a healthy relationship with God, a healthy lifestyle of wholeness or holiness, where spirit, mind, and body work and play together.”¹⁶

¹⁵Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 25.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 253.

Mass Communications professor Craig Detweiler and Popular Culture professor Barry Taylor frame postmodern culture and the experience of postmodern ethics and values through “post” words: post-national, post-rational, post-literal, post-scientific, post-sexual, post-racial, post-human, post-traumatic or therapeutic, post-ethical, and post-Christian.¹⁷ The authors see that the world has fundamentally changed from modernism to postmodernism, and postmodernism comes into people’s lives through music, movies, television, fashion, sports, and art. Their focus is on how a postmodernism view of reality impacts people’s lives through pop culture – the world in which people live and are shaped and influenced.

Salient Features

What are the prominent features of postmodernism? This is a difficult question to answer because, in the spirit of postmodernism, a kaleidoscope of suggestions exist. Faith and Culture professor Henry Lee Poe frames postmodernism into four primary features: personal focus, political alienation, philosophical dimensions, and theological beliefs.¹⁸ Regarding personal focus, he describes the postmodern world as highly relational; however, people, young and old, are seeking for authentic and lasting friendships which are needed desperately in a mobile and highly fragmented society.

Regarding political alienation, the postmodern generation has rejected allegiance to any external authorities, including God the Creator of the universe. “There is no sense of loyalty, obligation, duty, or civic responsibility to organizations or governmental

¹⁷Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003). Chapter one “Methodology: A Matrix of Meanings” serves as the foundation for this book. In this chapter, the authors lay out their “post” words and describes in detail what they mean by each “post” word.

¹⁸Harry Lee Poe, *Christian Witness in A Postmodern World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001).

structures.”¹⁹ Moral behavior becomes determined (i.e., socially constructed) by the individual inside a local or privatized community, and no sense of personal responsibility or accountability exists. Each person determines his or her own personal code of ethics and morality as confirmed by the community in which the person lives in.

Regarding philosophical dimensions, absolute certainty becomes questioned by postmodern people. A distinction must be between absolute truth and absolute knowledge, except for the radical and nihilistic postmodernist. “The postmodern generation has rejected the absolute claim to knowledge that science enjoyed.”²⁰ Postmodern people believe that human beings cannot know absolutely everything in spite of all the knowledge acquired through the modern methods of inquiry. In other words, postmoderns leave room for mystery in their epistemology. Regarding theological beliefs, postmodern people are spiritually seeking. As Poe recognizes, “The postmodern generation does not have a theological position so much as it lacks a theological position.”²¹

This does not mean, however, that postmodernists are not seeking a divine connection. It is just that as spiritual seekers they may not be seeking a Christian expression of faith, which is not surprising in the context of American history. Sociology professor Robert Wuthnow describes American spirituality as “an odd mixture of religious particularism and cultural pluralism.”²² He points out that the spiritual American heritage has always been a mix of the particular (Christian faith) and plurality

¹⁹Ibid., 79.

²⁰Ibid., 117.

²¹Ibid., 139.

²²Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press Press, 2005) , xi.

(other world religions). The history of American history points to an ongoing quest for spirituality by diverse people groups.

Whereas modernity divorced God out of life, the postmodern view remains open to spiritual matters, although some postmodern people reject God or the spiritual life just as some modern people do. The popularity of the television show *X-Files* reveals this openness to spiritual matters, not necessarily Christian in orientation. In this context, the missional question is what “god”²³ is the postmodern person looking for? The pursuit of “god” takes postmodern people down many spiritual paths in this pluralistic time. Poe mentions the central issue: “Why the God of creation is the one who deserves our attention.”²⁴

A different understanding from Poe is Kevin Hart’s view of postmodernism which focuses on the loss of origin in life and reality. For Hart, the salient features of postmodernism includes: anti-essentialism, anti-realism, and anti-foundationalism.²⁵ The cumulative effect of these three features breaks down all origins or beginnings of human beings in the postmodern world. Hart writes that there is, “no natural or universal essence to being human: everything to do with our state has been historically formed and culturally conditioned.”²⁶

Because of no “essentials,” whether moral, ethical, or religious, no human being can ever know what it means to be human and consequently know how to act morally, ethically, or religiously. The “essentials” of living become blurred. No human being can

²³When referring to lower case “g” for God, this author refers to the postmodern belief in a “higher power,” “a supreme being,” a general reference to a spiritual entity.

²⁴Poe, *Christian Witness*, 158.

²⁵Hart, *Postmodernism*, 26-32.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 26.

genuinely know what is real as well. Anti-realism promotes the belief that “there is no reality that is independent of the mind, and no truth that enjoys that status either.”²⁷ For the most radical follower of postmodern ethos, no firm ground to reality exists. No objective knowledge of reality is possible. Reality exists only as a socially constructed reality. Reality only exists through each individual’s interpretation as experienced in community. The final characteristic is the loss of foundations (anti-foundationalism). Foundationalism is the “grounding the entire edifice of human knowledge on invincible certainty.”²⁸ In the postmodern world, no foundations (social or religious) exist. No salient features are identifiable.

This author offers this construct as a means for considering the salient features of postmodernism. The salient descriptors of postmodernism include the following: beliefs, reality, ethics, truth, and self. Each of these grand stories show the influence in postmodern life and culture, especially life as engaged in culture. Beliefs, reality, ethics, truth, and the idea of self look differently in postmodern times. These salient descriptors become universal social constructions to the ardent, radical followers.

The influence of social constructionist thought extends into many areas of academic and social life: authorship, brotherhood, danger, emotions, facts, gender, literacy, reality, and postmodernism.²⁹ In each area, the question is, “What is actually socially constructed?” For example, in the area of reality, what in reality is said to be socially constructed? Another question is, “Does social constructionism imply

²⁷Ibid., 28.

²⁸Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 237.

²⁹For a full listing of titles and authors, see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), chapter 1, 1.

universalism?” Philosophy professor Ian Hacking refutes the notion of universal social constructionism, which states that nothing can exist unless it is socially constructed.³⁰

In relation to postmodern thought, however, there is a direct connection between universal social constructionism and postmodernism. In Baudrillard’s metaphor of simulacrum, for instance, in which the fake replaces the real, no reality exists except the unreal reality as socially constructed via media, entertainment industry, or theme parks. Whatever social entity created the simulacrum becomes the “creator” and controller of reality.

While not all postmodern thought leads to universal constructionism (the belief that nothing exists without being socially constructed), there is at minimum a genuine openness to the full implications of universal constructionist thought in some postmodern thinking and ethos.

For the purpose of this project, “social construction” refers to the radical implication of social constructionism to illustrate the potential of postmodern thinking to its logical conclusion, which is a radical relativism and universalism in all areas of life in which no moral, ethical, social, or spiritual foundations exist. In practice, this author believes that social construction refers to the shaping and influencing (i.e., construction) of one’s beliefs, reality, ethics, sense of truth, and presentation of self in a social community among personal relationships while anchoring to some foundations. Thus, social construction carries a specialized and limited meaning.

³⁰He cites sociologist Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967) and Philosophy professor John R. Searle *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) as scholars who argue against universal social constructionism. See Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1.

In the postmodern world, beliefs are social constructions. No transcendent meaning exists outside the community that gives meaning to beliefs. Beliefs become localized to a specific social community with no universal foundation. Beliefs then become privatized and relativized to what community one belongs to. No absolute or foundational belief exists in the postmodern world because beliefs are constantly changing, constantly being socially created through consumer choices or a community's language of beliefs. Further, beliefs are held to be equally true. All beliefs are to be respected and tolerated. The belief of the neo-pagan is equally valid as the belief of Wiccan believer. The belief of a New Age practitioner is equally valid as the belief for the practitioner of the Christian faith. Regarding Christianity's place in North American society, Pastor Dr. Robert Brewer elaborates: "North America possessed a Christian culture that served as the foundation for the religious worldview of the American people and was predominantly characterized as Protestant."³¹ Capo Beach Calvary pastor Chuck Smith Jr. points out that "Postmodernism refuses to privilege (give priority to) one culture or worldview over another. Every culture has a right to exist and pursue its own goals and embrace its own beliefs and values."³²

This is almost correct, however. Christianity is often not tolerated as an acceptable belief because of postmodernist images of "Christian" history and the imperialistic power exerted to force people into Christian belief. Such a history provides postmodern people with a biased and negative attitude toward the church and historic

³¹Robert Brewer, *Postmodernism: What You Should Know and Do About It*, 2d ed. (New York: Writer's Showcase, 2002), 9.

³²Chuck Smith Jr., *The End of the World As We Know It: Clear Direction for Bold and Innovative Ministry in A Postmodern World* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 58.

Christianity. When it comes to understanding Christianity, postmodernists selectively use history to morally and ethically evaluate present-day Christian belief and practice.

Postmodernists point to the use of coercive power throughout Christian history as evidence in rejecting Christian beliefs and people as well as violence done toward other humans. Selective examples include the Crusades, the sixteenth century religious wars in Western Europe, the colonization period of North and South America, and the emergence of slavery and segregation in the United States.

Consequently and correctly, as Brewer emphasizes, “Christianity seems to bear the brunt of the postmodern anger towards abuse of power via metanarrative. Many of the religion departments in today’s typical university even go so far as to portray Christianity as oppressive to other people groups.”³³ Consequently, Christian believers and churches get misjudged and stereotyped as hate groups because of past incidents when “Christians” misused their power.

Postmodernist’s evaluation of Christianity fails because of inaccurate assessment and understanding of Christian history.³⁴ The tendency to label Christians comes from a distortion of the nature of genuine Christianity. What postmodernists fail to recognize is the distinction between genuine and authentic followers of Christ and the false ones who were labeled as “Christian.” What is never considered in postmodern judgments against Christianity is a discerning judgment which sees past acts by “Christians” as non-Christian. Past acts of violence and terror stand against Jesus’ teaching of God’s peace

³³Brewer, *Postmodernism*, 29.

³⁴For an accurate and fair assessment of missions in Christian history, see David J. Bosch *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) , 220 – 230, 262 – 345.

and personal examples of nonviolence. Simply, Jesus never condones such action from His followers.

Jesus is called the Prince of Peace. “For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. And the government will rest on his shoulders. These will be his royal titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). Jesus imparts His peace to His followers so that we can have peace with God, peace within ourselves, and peace with others. As followers of Christ, the foundation of peace emerges from Christ’s name; and the nature of Christ’s peace is relational. We are to live in peace with one another. Friendly and peaceful relationships are to characterize the people of God.

The important of peace comes into view through Jesus’ teaching. In the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:2-11) Jesus outlines what a disciple’s life should like in disposition and action. God’s peace is among the essential qualities and actions Jesus is looking for from His followers. “God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God” (Matt. 5:9). His followers must have peace themselves before they can work for peace. When God’s peace rules the heart, Christ’s followers can only then work for peace. Working for peace means imitating Christ and initiating reconciliation in broken and wounded relationships between others and even between ourselves and others. The “business” of God the Father is a family one. The entire family of God must be working toward peace so that the walls which divide us can tumble down. In a postmodern world where people are divided by a wide range of political, social, national, and personal issues, working for God’s peace to reign in the kingdom means going into the world as Christ himself went into the world with the message, “God blesses those who work for peace...”

The foundation of God's peace leads to the second underpinning of Jesus life and ministry: nonviolence. Recognizing that His followers would face persecution and other acts of evil, Jesus pronounces, "God blesses you when you are mocked and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers" (Matt. 5:11). The implication from Jesus' teaching in this verse is that Christ's followers are not to retaliate in anger or even think about revenge. The way of Christ would be a nonviolent one. It would be a life different from lives in the world. Jesus goes on to illustrate His point by declaring that His followers would be "the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13) and "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). Noticeable in Jesus' teaching is that Jesus commands us to be salt and light. His followers are not given the option. It is not for Christ's followers to decide if they are to be the salt and the light. Jesus says, "You are..." (Matt. 5:13, 14).

At the end of chapter five in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus teaches on revenge and enemies. Regarding the desire for revenge, Jesus says, "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'If an eye is injured, injure the eye of the person who did it. If a tooth gets knocked out, knock out the tooth of the person who did it', But I say, 'don't resist an evil person! If you are slapped on the right check, turn the other, too!'" (Matt. 5:38-39). In this teaching, Jesus is telling His followers how to live in the world without a spirit of revenge toward others. Physical violence is not the way of a disciple. The temptation to retaliate against a person who has done something wrong toward you is to be overcome by a spirit of gentleness and forgiveness. This is the way of Christ, and so is the ethic of love.

Regarding enemies, Jesus says, "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say, 'love your enemies'" (Matt. 5:43-

44). Once again, Jesus is telling His followers how to live in the world without an attitude of hate toward others, who are identified as “enemies.” The temptation to seek revenge against “enemies” is to be overcome by a spirit of love which reaches out in nonviolent manners. Love is to be the way of peace in relationships. Jesus emphasizes love in other teachings³⁵ as well as forgiveness, which is opposite of violence.

Throughout Jesus’ teaching, a major emphasis is how to build and maintain right relationships with God and others by loving and forgiving others. Love and forgiveness are vital characteristics and actions of His followers. The pathway of nonviolence is one of love and forgiveness. Toward the end of the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13), Jesus connects a teaching on forgiveness: “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt. 6:14). Jesus connects divine and human forgiveness. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus shows us the necessity to seek God’s forgiveness through petition: “and forgive us of our sins” (Matt. 6:12) which the Father will do in relation to how forgiveness is given to others. Forgiveness, in other words, involves both the divine and human dimensions. A spirit of forgiveness involves a commitment to nonviolence.

Besides laying a foundation of nonviolence in His teaching, Jesus’ earthly life served as an example of nonviolence in action. Various scenes from the Passion narrative shows Jesus’ commitment in living out a peaceful, nonviolent life. Peter cuts off the ear of the high priest’s servant (Matt. 26:50–52). Jesus responds, “Put away your sword... Those who use the sword will be killed by the sword (v. 52). At the “trial” by Caiaphas (Matt. 26:57 – 68), Jesus is hit and spat upon in the face (v. 67). No response

³⁵See the Great Commandment Teaching (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31); the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25 – 37); and John 13:34; 14:21-23; 14:27; and 17:26.

from Jesus is recorded in Matthew's Gospel. There is no retaliation. There are no words at all. The same reaction is given by Jesus as he is scourged by the Roman soldiers (Matt. 27:26; Mark 15:15; John 19:1). Even as he is mocked by the Roman soldiers (Matt. 27:27-31), Jesus refuses to respond in violence. Stripped of His clothes along with his dignity, Jesus' commitment to a life of nonviolence continues – even while dying on the cross. Luke's Gospel records an intercessory prayer of forgiveness: "Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing" (23:34). In the midst of pain and abuse, Jesus reaches out with love through this prayer. Jesus was seeking forgiveness for those who caused His pain and suffering.

Christ's followers today need to be understood correctly by postmodernists. What also needs to be clearly understood is that most Christians are not asking for privileged status in society, even though some do. Christians want to be invited into conversations to share their ideas in the same manner that Christ came into the world. Christ's way was to embed himself into people's lives conversationally. To the Samaritan women, Jesus said, "Please give me some water" (John 4:7). To the man lying sick for thirty-eight years, Jesus asks, "Do you want to be well?" (John 5:5). To the woman caught in adultery, Jesus says, "Woman, where are they? Has no one judged you guilty?" (John 8:10). Most followers of Christ simply desire to be a voice to be heard among the many voices in the postmodern world. Christian beliefs have something to say to offer in our contemporary discussions regarding social, ethical, and religious issues.

In this cultural transition in which modern reality continues to exist, postmodern reality is emerging and morphing into many forms, which are united in a unified reaction against modernity. Postmodern thinkers see reality or life as social construction.

Existence becomes a creation or construct by each human being. The consequence of such a belief is that life is nothing but an endless creation of social constructions in which people “are *all* required to make choices about our realities.”³⁶ This turns reality into a commodity in which people pick and choose whatever reality they desire. Instead of a gift from God the Creator, reality becomes nothing more than merchandise. Each created reality “merely has to find its buyers, get a share of the market, and locate enough customers to fill up the theatre.”³⁷

Plural realities of varying moral and ethical qualities exist together with equal moral status. Postmodernism, writes Harvey, accepts “the idea that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate is essential to the pluralistic stance of postmodernism.”³⁸ Individuals and groups of people are encouraged to create realities and freely express themselves. In the world of social constructions of reality, who determines what reality is morally or ethically deviant? How do people decide which realities are valid? Each reality serves as a story for each individual. Broadcast and electronic Communication professor Arthur Asa Berger writes, “Just because postmodernists don’t believe in metanarratives doesn’t mean they don’t believe in any narratives. But how does one decide which ones are valid.”³⁹

Another problem in a postmodern world of social constructions is the inevitable collapse of reality. Ongoing commitment to living in a socially created world exacts a spiritual, moral, and emotional price on human beings. As Berger fittingly assesses: “Life

³⁶Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990) , 7.

³⁷Ibid, 9.

³⁸Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 48.

³⁹Arthur Asa Berger, *The Portable Postmodernist* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003) , 3.

has become a kind of theatre in which we are always taking on new roles (that is identities) and casting them off.”⁴⁰ The collapse of life becomes inevitable in such circumstances. How do people, who do not know how to create reality because of this mystery called the sinful human condition, attempt to do so? This is an ironic situation for the postmodern individual in the “big business” world of social constructions of reality. Every social construction contains the seeds of collapse into anonymity, meaningless, and nothingness. Illustrating this postmodern collapse is the postmodern, science fiction film the *Terminator*.⁴¹

The film tells the story of two characters: a cyborg – played by Arnold Schwarzenegger – and a woman, Sarah Conner, played by Linda Hamilton. The cyborg, a machine with the veneer of flesh, has been sent from the future to kill – to terminate – Conner so that she will not give birth to a son who will play a vital role in the survival of real human beings from the tyranny of cyborgs who simulate humans.

Flashbacks of the future are dispersed throughout the story which shows the battle between real humans and simulated humans, the cyborgs. The future is revealed to be a dark, desperate, and forbidding reality. The mood of the film, including scenes of present day, seems moody and edgy. A spirit of bleakness pervades present and future reality. An escalating sense of despair and fatalism builds as the story progresses in which the Terminator chases down the human.

As the chase progresses in present-day reality, Kyle Reese is sent from the future to protect Sarah Conner from the Terminator. The chase scenes are terrifying. Toward the

⁴⁰Ibid., 15.

⁴¹Arnold Schwarzenegger, *Terminator*, DVD, Written by James Cameron with Gale Anne Hurd and directed by James Cameron (1984; MGM Home Entertainment, 2001).

end of the chase, Reese is able to place a bomb inside the Terminator, which rips the cyborg in half and kills Reese; however, the Terminator is still able continue its mission. The top half, using its arms, continues to hunt down Conner, and is eventually killed as Sarah turns on a press. The story ends with a pregnant Sarah (impregnated by Reese) heading toward some mountain about “to start a line of progeny that will extend far into the future – into a time when many terminators exist, killing people and spreading mayhem.”⁴²

Postmodern themes about reality emerge throughout the film. One pervasive theme is the sense of a fearful, fatalism about life, both in the present and in the future. Berger identifies several key fatalistic elements:

- Powerful forces attack us that we cannot deal with.
- Relentless forces continue to hunt down human beings.
- Survival is by luck and chance.
- Authority is useless.
- The word *termination* carries with it the idea that some entity has the power to kill.⁴³

Throughout the movie, these fatalistic themes keep reoccurring to give an impression that nothing can make a positive difference in the postmodern world. Reality is permeated by a spirit of fatalism, which will never go away. Thereby, anxiety about existence always exists, whether in present-day reality or in the future.

Another postmodern theme is the nature of reality from discerning what is real or not real to what is a real human being? Is reality simulated, or is it real? The simulated

⁴²Arthur Asa Berger, *The Postmodern Presence: Readings on Postmodernism in American Culture and Society* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998) , 159.

⁴³Ibid., 160-161.

human – the cyborg – is cold, detached, determined, and strong. The terminator goes about the business of chasing down Conner to kill her. The real human – Sarah Conner – is warm, connected, and weak (in the sense of being fragile and can be killed). Both characters (the Terminator and the human) challenge the viewer to ask fundamental questions about what it means to be human. Who is more real? the simulated human? Or the real human? In the world of postmodernism, where identity is a matter of a social construction through the choices one makes as a consumer, who does one choose to be? A simulated human being? Or a real human being? Reality on an existential level can become confusing if one views reality and identity as a simple matter of making the right choices.

In the postmodern world, ethics becomes relative and situational in each socially created reality in a localized community. As with belief and reality, no consensual understanding of ethical behavior can be expected from people. It is up to each individual to live according to a self and socially created personal ethic as interpreted and allowed by a specific community. Consequently, personal and social ethics face the same shifting reality as do beliefs and reality. Ethics become a commodity in which people buy their own ethic. In the context of shifting ethical practice (not standard because there is no objective, transcendent ethic in the postmodern world), a series of critiquing questions needs asking. What becomes the basis of moral judgments? How are moral judgments even made? Who ultimately knows what is right and what is wrong? Does immoral and unethical behavior have a valid place in society? Is there any such concept as ethics?

Theology professor Millard Erickson points out that “the transition to a postmodern culture has certainly been accompanied by disastrous effects.”⁴⁴ This can be seen in the metanarratives of belief, reality, ethics, truth, and self (i.e., identity). The consequences of a postmodern ethos and culture are severe. In evaluating modernity ethically, Theology and Ethics professor Thomas Oden writes, “The party is over for the hedonic sexual revolution of the period from the sexy sixties to the gay nineties. The party crasher is sexually transmitted diseases. We are now having to learn to live with the consequences of sexual, interpersonal, and familial wreckage to which narcissistic self-indulgence has led us.”⁴⁵ The same moral evaluation can be made for the postmodern world. The collapse of ethics poses serious social, political, and spiritual challenges to society. With no binding ethical foundation that unites all humanity, how are the challenges to be faced? A moral ambiguity exists in the postmodern world. As Smith Jr. emphasizes, “Once absolutes are removed, we have a hard time answering the question ‘Why be moral?’ which devolves into other questions such as: ‘Why not have sex outside of marriage’ ‘Why not steal if no one will catch you?’ ‘why sacrifice your own freedom and pleasure to help others who are oppressed?’”⁴⁶

The television show *Seinfeld*⁴⁷ reveals a postmodern ethic which is relative and situational. *Seinfeld* tells the story of four friends: Jerry Seinfeld (Jerry Seinfeld), Elaine

⁴⁴Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise & Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) , 220.

⁴⁵Thomas C. Oden, *Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) , 116.

⁴⁶Smith Jr., *The End of the World As We Know It*, 73.

⁴⁷*Seinfeld*, situation comedy television show, July 5, 1989 – May 14, 1998, “The Finale,” Part 1 & 2. Created by Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David and produced by Shapiro / West productions in association with Castle Rock Entertainment. The author viewed “The Finale” on TBS.

Marie Benes (Julia Louis Dreyfus), Cosmo Kramer (Michael Richards), and George Louis Costanza (Jason Alexander). These four friends live and work in New York City.

The television character Jerry plays a stand up comedian who frequently enters and leaves personal relationships with attractive women without either remorse or regret. He continually makes observational and humorous comments about life, even when life is sorrowful and painful. Even his friends are not exempt from his humorous comment. Other attributes of the Jerry character includes taking pleasure in other people's failure, including his friends, and helping others reluctantly.

Elaine is Jerry's former girlfriend and good friend throughout the show. She continues to seek employment, holding frequent jobs which range from publishing to personal assisting. Like George and Jerry, she enters into numerous on-again, off-again relationships and constantly seeks attractive individuals. She becomes extremely jealous of George's engagement to his fiancé. Other personality traits include apathy to the problems of others unless they involve her and her bitterness over life.

Cosmo is Jerry's neighbor who constantly intrudes into Jerry's life and apartment, even in intimate moments when Jerry brings a date home. He has no permanent employment, and is unwilling to get a normal job. He seems to have inherited money and constantly involves himself in money-making schemes. Like his friends, he enters and leaves relationships quickly and seeks attractive individuals. Other personality traits include his fear of clowns and brutal honesty.

George is Jerry's neurotic friend, who is short, stocky and bald. His domineering parents always interfere in his life, but he cannot seem to escape their presence and influence. All his intimate relationships with women end up as failures, especially his

engagement which is ironically his most disastrous and failed relationship. George constantly seeks employment, holding many jobs and keeps asking Jerry for career advice, which is frequently not helpful. One of his jobs was for the New York Yankees. Other personality traits included his constant pathological lying without regret and fear of death.

What unites Jerry, Elaine, Cosmo, and George ethically is their commitment to a non-foundational personal and social ethic. None of the four characters appear to be religious or spiritual. God plays no significant role in how they behave or treat others. A callous indifference, even towards one another, describes their social and ethical commitment. In the last episode of the series, the television network offers Jerry a private jet to any destination. The four friends decide on Paris. On the flight, the plane experiences an incident and goes into a crash dive. The plane lands in a small town in Massachusetts for repair. The foursome goes into town and debates about if they are going to get back on the plane. They witness the robbery of a fat guy in which they all mock and Kramer videotapes. This incident describes their postmodern moral and ethical commitment.

In the postmodern world, truth is a social construct as well. Truth turns into a product of one's own understanding, historically and culturally conditioned. Truth becomes a perspective. Truth exists pluralistically in which many truths exist side by side of one another. At the most relativistic, truth becomes whatever each individual or community desires or constructs it to be. Greer makes this astute observation: "A plurality of truths ultimately leaves people unable to know what is and what is not the

correct system of truth.”⁴⁸ The postmodernist will ultimately face the collapse of truth when truth can no longer be discerned. At this point, truth degenerates into an illusion, just like belief, reality, and ethics. Who knows what truth is in the postmodern culture? Truth, in the most relativist form of postmodern belief, becomes anything a person wants it to be. What Anderson says about beliefs (becoming a commodity) holds equally true for the concept of truth. Without any foundation of truth, the postmodernist is left adrift searching and seeking for a truth that is just an illusion and does not originate inside a socially constructed world.

The television show *X Files* typifies a postmodern search for truth among a plurality of truths as socially created in manipulative ways by secret and nefarious individuals and groups of individuals. The show tells the story of special agents Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) who are seeking the truth “out there.” Specifically, Mulder seeks the truth about his abducted sister. In this search, they experience various encounters with strange and mystifying circumstances, “aliens” and apparent conspirators. This journey takes them across the country and the world. Sometimes, Mulder and Scully experience near death incidents. The theme of truth permeates the journey of both agents, which parallels the postmodern search.

Mulder keeps holding on to a truth that is “out there” even though he comes close to giving in to his skepticism and disbelief. He does not descend into a postmodern, nihilistic outlook even though truth comes close to being an illusion for him at various times when circumstances reveal themselves to be false. The search for truth goes on for Mulder as it does for postmodern people. Along the way, he meets people who apparently

⁴⁸Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism*, 73.

“construct” truth in a deliberate manner that keeps real truth from him, which causes questions in his mind. Yet, there remains a passionate drive within him as a human being that keeps him searching.

The show is postmodern in many ways: the search for authentic relationships and community, the openness to mystery in spirituality, the looking for truth. However, it is also modern in its essence as well since the storyline involves an objective truth “out there” somewhere theme. The spirit of the show, as seen through its popularity, actually connects with a modern and postmodern audience. Truth is important to both ethos. In actuality, how the show portrays this quest for truth represents the genuine spirit of people who live in a blended world of modernism and postmodernism. There remains a remnant of objective truth for the postmodernist with the postmodern caveat that truth can be manipulated and controlled to appear as objective truth. Any person can be manipulated into believing a constructed truth from an individual, groups of people, or social institution.

In the postmodern world, self or personal identity is socially constructed through the choices they make. A person can be anyone they desire to be. People can pick and choose (from other people’s lives) who they want to be and what they want to do. A prime example is the popular singer Madonna who changes identities (i.e., reinvents herself). Berger rightly asks, “Does Postmodernism ‘condemn’ people to keep re-inventing themselves endlessly?”⁴⁹ Without being able to offer anything “real” whether it is belief, reality, ethics, or truth, this cultural milieu of postmodernism offers no help toward people in establishing a genuine or real identity that is emotionally and psychologically stable. “Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of

⁴⁹Berger, *The Postmodern Presence* , 13.

continuous construction and reconstruction.”⁵⁰ What happens to the meaning of “self” in this circumstance of identity creation?

This author suggests that a drift toward meaningless and hopelessness happens to people when faced with continuous, schizophrenic assault of human construction of personal and social identity. For persons who currently suffer from emotional or psychological brokenness and woundedness, the schizophrenia only deepens and causes further unreality in the person’s lives. It comes as no surprise that people emotionally drown in deep despair and meaninglessness due to lack of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual foundations. Sociology professor Peter Berger comments: “This danger [meaningless] is the nightmare *par excellence*, in which the individual is submerged in a world of disorder, senselessness and madness. Reality and identity are malignantly transformed into meaningless figures of horror.”⁵¹ In describing modern life but applicable to postmodern living, English professor Gary Eberle accurately comments that postmodernists are “living lives without geographic or, by extension, moral and spiritual centers. Most of us cannot really locate ourselves in space or time in any meaningful sense of the words. We find ourselves living in a geography of nowhere.”⁵²

A prime example is film character Zelig. In a narrative and interview style, comprised of newsreel and documentary commentary and footage, Woody Allen’s film *Zelig* tells the story of Leonard Zelig (Woody Allen), a man who suffers from severe

⁵⁰Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) , 7.

⁵¹Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of A Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967, 1990) , 22.

⁵²Gary Eberle, *The Geography of Nowhere: Finding One’s Self in the Postmodern World* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1994) , 6.

identity crisis.⁵³ Because of Zelig's neurotic insecurity, low self-worth, and intense desire to be liked and loved, he transforms himself into new personalities in both body and mannerisms. He literally mimics people he is with thus earning the moniker "Human Chameleon."

The movie begins in the Twenties, showing the meteoric rise of Zelig as a celebrity due to his dysfunctional personality. The newsreel footage begins at a party on the Long Island estate of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Porter Sutton and then quickly proceeds to show Zelig's personality transformations as a baseball player for the New York Yankees, as a gangster and Black man at a private party in a speakeasy, as Pagliacci from a picture in his home, as a Chinese person in Chinatown (New York City), and as a psychiatric doctor when he is taken to a medical treatment facility in Manhattan where he meets Dr. Eudora Fletcher.

The documentary quickly flashes to pictures of family history and fills in details of Zelig's childhood. Leonard is the son of Yiddish actor, Morris Zelig. Family life is unstable. His father's second marriage is filled with violence. Leonard is bullied by anti-Semites. The voice of the narrator indicates that Leonard's parent blame him for everything but side with the anti-Semites. His parents frequently punish him by locking him in a dark closet. On his father's deathbed, Morris says to Leonard, "Life is a meaningless nightmare of suffering." The scenes quickly change to pictures of Leonard's brother Jack, who suffers a nervous breakdown, and sister Ruth, who is a shoplifter and alcoholic. The narrator purports that Zelig begins to show signs of "increasingly strange behavior."

⁵³Woody Allen, *Zelig*, DVD, Written and directed by Woody Allen (1983; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, Inc., 2001). All quotations come from this DVD as transcribed by this author.

Flashing back to pictures of the Manhattan hospital, the story continues with several pictures of Zelig transforming himself into a Frenchman, a Chinese person, an overweight man, and a Black man. Showing a picture of Dr. Eudora Fletcher, the narrator expresses Fletcher's professional opinion: Zelig suffers from a psychological condition which causes him to change personalities.

The documentary then shows scenes (with voice over narration) of Dr. Fletcher beginning to medically treat Leonard. While under hypnosis, she asks, "Why [do] you assume the characteristics of the person you're with"? Zelig responds, "It's safe." Fletcher asks, "What do you mean safe"? Zelig answers, "I want to be liked." On screen, a picture of Dr. Fletcher before her colleagues, the narrator, speaking for the doctor, says that Zelig changes to protect himself. She describes him as a human chameleon. Pictures of skeptical colleagues are shown.

The documentary shows more footage of Dr. Fletcher interviewing Zelig. She asks, "When did the changes begin happening automatically"? he responds, "Years ago. Saint Patrick's Day. I wandered into a bar. Wasn't wearing green. They made remarks. I turned Irish." Pictures of other medical treatment flash across the screen.

The story continues with Zelig being discharged from the hospital into the custody of his sister Ruth and her boyfriend Martin Geist, who begin to market and exploit Leonard as a commodity. Across the screen, the narrator describes all the merchandise: doll, pens, luck charms, clocks, toys, watches, books. Zelig is taken to Hollywood, Chicago, Washington D.C., and France. The narrator makes this succinct commentary: "Zelig's own existence is a nonexistence...a cipher, a nonperson, a performing freak."

Zelig turns up missing, is lost and forgotten until an incident at the Vatican, involving the Pope. He is returned to the hospital, and Dr. Fletcher takes Leonard to her home to begin specialized medical treatment, which is filmed and recorded. These treatment sessions become known as the “White Room Sessions.” During one session, the doctor asks, “Who are you?” He answers, “I’m nobody. I’m nothing.” In another session, Zelig reveals: “My brother beat me. My sister beat my brother. My father beat my sister and my brother and me. My mother beat my father and my sister and me and my brother. The neighbors beat our family. People down the block beat the neighbors and our family.”

The documentary shows intimate interaction between Eudora and Leonard as the treatment progresses. During interviews in a hypnotic trance, Zelig makes two revealing comments: (1) “I hated my stepmother.” and (2) “You have to be your own person and make your own moral choices even when they do require real courage.” At last Leonard becomes his own man. The narrator says, “He is finally an individual. He no longer gives up his identity to be a safe part of his surroundings.”

Several pictures are shown of Zelig functioning as a human being, including pictures of him and Eudora making wedding plans. In the midst of personal happiness, scandal emerges. Interviews of several individuals are shown of people accusing Zelig, while in other identities, of various crimes and immoral behavior: bigamy, larceny, an unauthorized appendectomy, an automobile accident, unnecessary dental extractions, and an unusual delivery of a baby. The documentary shows Zelig in a press conference in which he apologizes. Unable to deal with the emotional and psychological pressure, Leonard disappears and remains missing for many months until Eudora spots him in Nazi

Germany from a newsreel clip. Through a miraculous escape, they fly to New York City upside down in record time. The fallen hero is restored and receives a presidential pardon for all his crimes. The movie ends by saying the Leonard and Eudora lived a loving life together, and all the psychological symptoms gradually disappeared.

What makes *Zelig* – and the character Leonard Zelig – connect with postmodern people is the intense loss of personal identity that began in the midst of an unstable family life and absence of moral, ethical, or religious foundations. From the early scenes, which described Zelig's early childhood, no emotional, psychological, or relational foundations were ever established in his life. Noticeably absent was any religious or spiritual foundation.⁵⁴ Religious training was absent in the lives of Zelig and his family, thus no spiritual foundations were laid for anyone in the family.

Postmodernists can relate to Leonard because both live in a “geography of nowhere” in which personal identity has become meaningless and decentered because of the absence of any moral, ethical, or relational foundations. The instability of life for Zelig and postmodernists is directly related to the lack of any center in life, whether in the area of emotions, sense of self, relationships, or spiritual connectedness. Instability characterized his life from birth to adulthood, and this existence became normalized for him. Consequently, personal identity as a human being becomes confused, and Leonard creates his identity by mimicking other people and thus lives in the postmodern existence in a “geography of nowhere.” Essentially, *Zelig* tells a postmodern story of the continuing

⁵⁴There was one scene in the movie in which Zelig went to a Jewish rabbi to ask about the meaning of life. The rabbi responded in Hebrew, and would teach him the language for six hundred dollars. Religion is showed in a negative view through this scene.

search for self-identity in which the main protagonist is “a self that changes constantly, that is unstable, decentered, and discontinuous.”⁵⁵

Evaluating Postmodernism

How is postmodernism to be evaluated? How helpful is it? Postmodernism as an intellectual and cultural reaction contains a number of negative and positive features from an intellectual, philosophical, and Christian evaluation. There is a good, bad, and ugly to the postmodern ethos.

One such negative criticism is postmodernism’s contradictory nature. Does postmodernism constitute a metanarrative all the while rejecting such grand stories of belief and reality? Millard Erickson believes so. He writes, “the deconstruction practiced by Derrida is a universal theory. It is a claim that all theories contain contrary internal elements. It is a claim that that everything, with one exception as noted above, can and must be deconstructed.”⁵⁶ Greer also agrees: “Postmodernism, in spite of its so-called tolerance of competing ‘truths’ is itself a metanarrative and therefore has never truly moved beyond modernism.”⁵⁷ Derrida and his ideas on “deconstruction” theory presents a metanarrative as does Foucault’s ideas on knowledge and power, Lyotard’s ideas on “incredulity of metanarratives,” and Baudrillard’s notion of simulation and hyperreality. Postmodern thought cannot escape its ironic tendency toward being metanarratives, metanarratives in a special sense.

⁵⁵Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 105.

⁵⁶Millard J. Erickson, *The Postmodern World: Discerning the Times and the Spirit of Our Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002) , 103.

⁵⁷Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism*, 89-90.

According to Christian theologian David Wells, postmodernism has destroyed worldviews that apply universally to all people. In the process, the existence of universal truth has collapsed and disappeared along with the question of meaning, purpose, and existence. All that remains in the postmodern world are “privatized worldviews” that are valid only to the person, not for everyone else. He writes, “They [privatized worldviews] qualify as worldviews because postmoderns are still addressing questions about what is ultimate (the answer is nothing) about the meaning of the universe (the answer is that it has none) and about human experience.”⁵⁸ All aspects of life – belief, reality, ethics, truth, self – become relativized to a specific (i.e., privatized) community in which no universal truth or belief exists that extends to other communities.

Another criticism is the disorientation and terror that postmodernism creates. In criticizing modernism, Lyotard writes that modernism has given “as much terror as we can take.”⁵⁹ But has not postmodernism done the same? In the postmodern world, truth and reality no longer exist in an absolute sense. What reality exists is one of nihilism (absence of essentials and foundations) and relativism with no sense of optimism or hope. How can there not be terror!

A third criticism is the epistemological and reality crisis which emerges from the postmodern world. If knowledge is only a social construct and no foundation of objective truth exists, then how can any person know what is real and not real? The implication of postmodern ethos is that people will only experience hyperreality in which people only encounter artificially-created, false realities. By holding a socially constructed view of

⁵⁸David Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005) , 74.

⁵⁹Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81.

reality, people become consumers of reality and belief. Anderson writes, “never before has a society allowed its people to become consumers of belief, and allowed belief – all beliefs – to become merchandise.”⁶⁰ A pervasive emptiness and meaningless envelops postmodern people as they are swallowed up by the endless choices and the constant demand to make consumeristic decisions in the effort to create real life with real relationships.

Without ethical or moral or spiritual foundations that transcend people or communities of people, the quest for meaning and purpose in life remains unfulfilled. Like an empty boat floating in the midst of an ocean, postmodernists drift in life because the social construction of identity and reality is a futile and empty process as people free-float aimlessly through life with no foundations. They exist as people in “a geography of nowhere.” Wells correctly describes this nowhere condition: “if there is no clear starting point, no foundation of basic belief, and most importantly of all, no metaphysical authorization of any truth whatsoever that we can know; formulating beliefs becomes a matter of trial and error to see what works.”⁶¹

A fourth criticism, as viewed from Hutcheon and other feminists, is that postmodernism “deconstructs but it does not reconstruct, which means it is essentially quietistic.”⁶² This is unacceptable for feminists and other liberationists. Nowhere, for instance, does Baudrillard suggest a helpful alternative to simulation and hyperreality. The same goes for Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Fish, or Rorty. In the ends, postmodern writers offer no hope to people, only deconstruction. While postmodernists react to

⁶⁰Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*, 188.

⁶¹Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers*, 81.

⁶²Berger, *The Portable Postmodernist*, 19.

modernity, their views simply stay a reaction. No (re)construction emerges from their writings. This is a glaring weakness in the context of moral and ethical erosion in society.

A fifth, and final criticism, comes in the form of a question: “Does the ethos of postmodernism relativize and pluralize truth?” Philosophy professor Douglas Groothuis affirms this question. He writes, “Truth decay is a cultural condition in which the very idea of absolute, objective and universal truth is considered implausible, held in open contempt or not even seriously considered.”⁶³ Religious Studies professor Carl Rasche suggests Groothuis’s view is a caricature of people who hold postmodern views. He writes, “The most common caricature of postmodernism is that it is a complete denial of truth, thus relativizing everything.”⁶⁴

This author supports a careful reading of all postmodern writers to avoid caricaturizing them as radical relativists and nihilists. This is not to indicate that no extreme beliefs emerge from postmodernist writings. Baudrillard writes, “I observe, I accept, I assume, I analyze the second revolution, that of the twentieth century, that of postmodernity, which is the immense process of the destruction of meaning, equal to the earlier destruction of appearances. He who strikes with meaning is killed by meaning.”⁶⁵ Even for postmodern writers who share a less relativistic view of truth, knowledge, and socially constructed reality, there remains an **openness** (emphasis this author) to head down the pathway of radical extremism and nihilism. In other words, the proverbial door

⁶³Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) , 22.

⁶⁴Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004) , 17.

⁶⁵Jean Baudrillard, “On Nihilism” in Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994) , 160 – 161.

becomes open to such radical thought even though not intended. This is where the danger lies for all expressions of postmodern thought.

In this author's view, all is not bad or ugly in postmodern thought, though a balanced caution is needed in identifying the good and positive aspects of postmodern thought. Postmodernism is not to be treated as the "enemy," a danger in some evangelical and conservative circles. A fair but critical scrutiny needs to be balanced with both negative (five) and positive (five) evaluations.

The first positive evaluation of postmodernism is that "it simply does not believe that human reason holds all the answers to life's questions."⁶⁶ For the postmodernist, the twentieth century verified that technology and science does not provide answers to life's most pressing issues and problems. In fact, the opposite happened: the twentieth century supported the notion that deeper global and national problems emerged in the context of wars, environmental abuse, and the loss of objective and absolute truth. Modernity did give a privileged position to reason and the quest for knowledge which only led to more profound questions about life. Modernity failed to address these issues.

A second positive contribution of postmodernism is its recognition of the voices of marginalized groups. Old Testament professor J. Richard Middleton and University of Toronto chaplain Brian Walsh write, "Recognizing that 'truth' is a human, social construction, deconstructionists force us to inquire about what (and who) has been left out, silenced, or suppressed in all constructions that aspire toward a *total* accounting of reality."⁶⁷ The voices from the margins of society now have a permanent presence in the

⁶⁶Smith Jr., *The End of the World As We Know It*, 47.

⁶⁷J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in A Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995) , 34 – 35.

postmodern world. During modernity, these silenced voices were either suppressed or ignored. Women, ethnic peoples, lower social classes, and victims of violence could never fully represent themselves. The postmodern world changed this. Most voices are now heard, with the exception of the Christian voice.

An ethical problem, however, emerges, because how does one evaluate all the marginalized voices? Are all voices treated as ethically and morally equal? For example, in the postmodern world the voice of neo-Nazi groups is allowed as a result of tolerance attitudes towards ethics and morality. Other hate groups also are allowed to share their hate-filled and driven voice. Without a unifying moral and ethical foundation, who is to determine what is right and what is wrong. The voices of hate groups have legitimacy in a postmodern world. If not hate groups, what about the voice of gay and lesbian groups?

A third positive is that “postmoderns reject as pretentious the modern focus on the self.”⁶⁸ With the rise of modernity came the rise of the individual or “autonomous rational subject.”⁶⁹ The human being, with scientific methodology and reason could “discover” the truth out there in the cosmos. All the individual needed to do was apply logic and reason. From a philosophical standpoint, human beings became the center of the universe. There was no social problem that could not be solved if human beings used their mind in applying scientific principles. Society then could progress toward a moral and ethical utopia. Postmodern thinkers reject such modernistic view of life and the cosmos. What concerns postmoderns is community, not individualism.

⁶⁸Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996) , 123.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

A fourth positive is that postmodern thinkers “have correctly pointed out that truth can be manipulated as a means of achieving one’s ends.”⁷⁰ This “spin doctoring” of truth occurs in politics (e.g., President Clinton’s testimony regarding the Monica Lewinsky affair); statistical interpretation; news stories; film movies; and photography. The “truth” in pictures is debatable with the advent of image editing software that can manipulate the original picture. What does a “real” picture look like? Because human beings can easily manipulate truth, discerning questions need asking.

A fifth, and final, positive is that postmodernism correctly points out that “there are dimensions of actual, valid knowledge that transcend the narrow scope of scientific / mathematical method.”⁷¹ Postmodern thinkers allow for intuition in epistemology. Knowledge cannot simply be narrowed into categories that are empirically observed and verified. Postmoderns allow for mystery in gaining knowledge. This is especially important in religious knowledge. The Bible simply cannot be read for the latest scientific “discovery” about God, for God cannot be contained in the Bible.

Where does the Christian evaluation of postmodernism begin? For Christian believers, the evaluative process emerges from the Bible. For the Christian community, the Bible “is our sufficient and final authority for faith and practice.”⁷² Affirming this evangelical commitment, the Lausanne Covenant states, “We affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written word of God, without error in all that it affirms, and the only

⁷⁰Erickson, *Truth or Consequence*, 194.

⁷¹Erickson, *The Postmodern World*, 93.

⁷²OMS International, “OMS Statement of Faith,” (Greenwood, IN: OMS International, Inc., 2007), <http://omsinternational.org/about/statement-of-faith>. (accessed May 14, 2006). This quotation comes from OMS International, an evangelical ministry which aims to reach the nations of the world for Christ.

infallible rule of faith and practice.”⁷³ The scope of biblical authority extends to all faith and practice, belief and practices of ministry for the Christian community for all family groups (i.e., denominational expressions of faith). With this evaluative foundation, postmodern beliefs and practices can be evaluated.

God’s holy Word has many purposes and is powerful. Holy Scripture is for admonishment (Ps. 17:4); assurance (1 John 5:13); blessing (Deut. 11:22-28); comfort (Ps. 119:50); discipline (2 Tim. 3:16); edification (Ps. 119:28); encouragement (Rom. 15:4); guidance (Ps. 19:8); and hope (Ps. 119:49). The power of God’s Word lies in the Word itself, for God continues to speak to human beings in all cultures, whether ancient, medieval, modern, or postmodern. All cultures need a Word from God no matter if the word is correction or discipline, as the Lausanne Covenant emphasizes:

We also affirm the power of God's word to accomplish his purpose of salvation. The message of the Bible is addressed to all men and women. For God's revelation in Christ and in Scripture is unchangeable. Through it the Holy Spirit still speaks today. He illumines the minds of God's people in every culture to perceive its truth freshly through their own eyes and thus discloses to the whole Church ever more of the many-colored wisdom of God. (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21; John 10:35; Isa. 55:11; 1 Cor. 1:21; Rom. 1:16, Matt. 5:17,18; Jude 3; Eph. 1:17,18; 3:10,18)⁷⁴

The Word of God has something to say about beliefs, reality, ethics, truth, and self (i.e., personal sense of identity). In other words, the Bible establishes non-negotiable moral, spiritual, or relational foundations that extends to all areas of life and living in all cultures through human history.

These foundations or essentials emerge from Creation in which a loving and compassionate Creator created. “In the beginning God created...(Gen. 1:1). Chapter 1 in

⁷³The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, “Lausanne Covenant,” (Lausanne, Switzerland, 1974), <http://www.lausanne.org/Brix?pageID=12891>. (accessed May 14, 2006).

⁷⁴Ibid.

Genesis tells the detailed story of God's creative act, simply by speaking. Human beings, male and female, were the apex of God's creation. They were created in "the image of God" (Gen. 1:27). They were not created without meaning or purpose. Adam and Eve were to "multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). Problems arose in creation with the entrance of sin as Adam and Eve sinned against the Lord God Creator. All of creation was affected by their sin. There was separation from the Creator, separation from creation itself, separation from one another as husband and wife, and separation in all personal relationships. One brother Cain would eventually kill his brother Abel.

Humanity stood in need of redemption with God the Creator and creation which was accomplished through Jesus Christ's redemptive death and resurrection. God's story of redemption ends by showing how God's not only destroys sin and death but evil as well.

This divine story has implications for beliefs, reality, ethics, truth, and identity. God has created human beings as an integrated whole. "Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until that day when our Lord Jesus Christ comes again" (1 Thess. 5:23). All human beings have a spirit, soul, and body. Our human spirit is "the lamp of the Lord."⁷⁵ It is the light of God in our being. Our human soul is "the command center of the personality"⁷⁶ which consists of the mind, emotions, and will. Beliefs – all beliefs – emerge from human intelligence as given to people from God and are shaped and formed by culture. The problem becomes the presence of sin which distorts the beliefs of rebellious and disobedient human beings. Humans begin to divorce God out of beliefs, including

⁷⁵Proverbs 20:27 NKJ (New King James)

⁷⁶This author credits Dr. Jack Hayford, founding pastor of Church on the Way (Van Nuys, California) and president of the Foursquare Church, for this understanding of the human soul. This teaching was presented during a session of Hayford's School of Pastoral Nurture.

spiritual beliefs, and replace the Creator with humanity as the originator of beliefs. Also, Satan, the enemy (Matt. 13:25), the evil one (Eph. 6:16), the father of lies (John. 8:44), deceives people into certain beliefs. In this earthly life, not all beliefs bring glory to God.

Reality, including human culture, as shown through God's creative act, is a gift from the Creator, neither a creation by human beings nor a social construction. Our human reality, individually and corporately, comes from God. Just like human beliefs, human reality exists in a broken, wounded, and fragile condition because of the presence of sin. The "father of lies" continues to destroy people's reality by removing moral and ethical foundations that God embedded in creation as communicated through God's Law. Human beings are ignorant of the Law (Eph. 4:18); disobey the Law (Num. 14:41); fail to live up to the Law (Isa. 59:12); pervert the Law (Prov. 12:8); and violate the Law (Hosea 6:7). Accordingly, reality as understood by human beings becomes impacted by sin. Rebellious humanity distorts reality into a creation of humanity.

Ethics in a broken and wounded world become relative and situational. Human beings dictate what is right and what is wrong. For the Christian community, personal and social ethics emerge from God's Law, which governs all of creation. Human beings are to treat people with justice. For instance, God says: "Do not twist justice against people simply because they are poor" (Exod. 23:6) and "True justice must be given to foreigners living among you and to orphans, and you must never accept a widow's garment in pledge of her debt" (Deut. 24:17). Various Psalms read: "He will judge the world with justice and rule the nations with fairness" (Ps. 9:8); "You will bring justice to the orphans and the oppressed, so people can no longer terrify them" (Ps. 10:18); and

“For the LORD is righteous, and he loves justice. Those who do what is right will see his face” (Ps. 11:7). Jesus sums up God’s moral and ethical standard with one word – love. When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus responds, “And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength” (Matt. 12:30). When asked about the second commandment, Jesus says, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt.12:31). Ethics are to reflect love – a love that recognizes boundaries and unambiguous ethical and moral commitments in all situations.

Truth emerges from God’s character. “But you, O Lord, are a merciful and gracious God, slow to get angry, full of unfailing love and truth” (Ps. 86:15). Absolute, objective, and universal truth exists; however, in a fallen world that continues to be influenced by the presence of sin, the decay of truth continues in the postmodern world. This continuing degradation of truth has moral, ethical, and religious implications resulting in a postmodern world that is devoid of any universal truth to guide moral, ethical, and religious behavior. The truth of Scripture gets turned into a truth among other truths. God’s Word rejects this relativized notion of truth. Biblical truth emerges from the Creator as part of the moral fabric of creation which stands as objective and universal.

Personal identity comes from creation. Because human beings are God’s special work of creation and have the “image of God” in them, even though sin has deformed God’s image, every person has intrinsic worth. This means that all people are special to the Creator and thus can see themselves as valuable. People are special for who they are, not what they do (activities, work) or achieve (education, career path, social status, achievements). Humanity, however, still lives amidst the presence of sin and death and people still see themselves by what they do and achieve. Consequently, postmodern

culture reflects sin in how individuals are viewed and treated. In these postmodern times, people are valued and judged frequently by achievement and status. God's Word rejects such evaluations.

To summarize, the Christian community's evaluation of postmodernism begins with God's Holy Word, for the Word of God is the standard by which Christian believers evaluate culture, modern, postmodern, or emerging. God's Word has something to say about beliefs, reality, ethics, truth, and identity. God's Word has something to say about postmodern culture's view of them in a corrective manner. The aforementioned critiques offer just a brief sample of how God's Word critiques postmodernism and rejects its tenets which are not biblical in essence. The task of the Christian community is to study God's Word for further biblical critique as postmodern times continues to change and morph into an emerging culture. Biblical critique is necessary for ongoing engagement with postmodernism.

Effects on the Church

The impact on the North American Church is deep and multifaceted. While congregations or individual Christians may never read postmodernists like John Barth, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Paul DeMan, Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Richard Rorty, churches will be surrounded by the postmodern ethos as filtered through advertising, the entertainment industry (film movies, recording, and television), fashion, sports, art, and themed environments such as restaurants and malls.⁷⁷ In other words, pop culture will be

⁷⁷For a discussion on the postmodern presence in themed restaurants and malls, see Mark Gottdiener, "Themed Environments of Everyday Life: Restaurants and Malls" in Arthur Asa Berger, ed., *The Postmodern Presence* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), 74 – 87.

the means through which congregations and individual Christians will be impacted by postmodern values and ethos. No church, large or small in worship size or membership, is exempt from the impact of postmodernism.

Three central and critical effects impact North American churches. They include disorientation, ineffectiveness, and loss of identity.⁷⁸ This author would further add the loss of purpose and loss of historical connection (in a denominational sense) as other key impacts. The loss of purpose closely emerges from a loss of biblical and historical identity. These impacts illustrate the extensive impact among many churches throughout North America. Christian futurist Leonard Sweet sees the impact of postmodernism as a spiritual tsunami.

Disorientation or confusion comes when sudden change happens so fast that there is no time to adjust. The church in North America had lived within a modern culture and its related foundations and assumptions so long that congregations had grown too comfortable in their “success” if success is the correct evaluation. Accordingly, it was taken for granted that North America and Western European churches would continue to play a significant role in the life of their countries, that Christian faith would always have privileged status. The emergence of the postmodern ethos and experience changed all the rules. No longer would churches shape values of people. No longer would Christian churches play a significant shaping and influencing role in culture. Confusion entered into the lives of churches which continue today. There appears to be no lessening of this confusion in the near future by churches.

⁷⁸Smith Jr., *The End of the World As We Know It* , 14 – 16.

Ineffectiveness correctly describes the ministry of many churches. These churches continue to minister based upon methods in the 1950s and 1960s. Even methods of ministry in the 1990s will not be effective. Consequently, many churches continue to fail to communicate with contemporary generations of people, whether they are modern or postmodern in viewpoint. What worked in the past is not working today in spite of the belief that ministry programs will. Each cultural setting demands new methods in order to reach the younger generation. For instance, modern methods of evangelism based upon logical and progressive reason will fail to communicate with many postmodern people.

Loss of identity happens when the focus of the church and any disciple gets off Jesus. Churches have been sinking slowly and quickly over the past thirty years because of the loss of Jesus in their lives. Rather than participating with Jesus on His mission in the world as missional churches, churches have become “solid.”⁷⁹ These churches forget to see themselves as participants in God’s mission, a mission that began at creation. What becomes emphasized in this situation is the survival of the church. A survival, in-focused mentality permeates every area of church life. Identity gets reduced to mere survival.

Loss of purpose is strongly related to loss of identity. Loss of either one implies the loss of the other. The identity of churches as missional churches became lost throughout the 1960s and later. Consequently, the purpose of the churches – to make disciples – became tainted with unbiblical approaches to ministry, as expressed through “programmatic” approaches. United Methodist churches throughout Nebraska are presently heavy laden with programs from the denominational office. These failed

⁷⁹See Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* for a full descriptive account of how churches have entered into this spiritual and ecclesial condition.

programs exacerbate the loss of purpose and identity, thus causing further erosion of churches' spirit, a spirit that is negative and depressing.

The Church's Reaction to Postmodernism

What should the response be from North American churches? The first response is not to treat postmodernism as the "enemy." Agreeing with this stance, Mars Hills Church pastor Marc Driscoll writes, "postmodern culture is not something we should ignore, oppose, or embrace."⁸⁰ Classifying persons and groups into a category such as "enemy" to protect the "truth" is problematic biblically and theologically. However, certain segments of Protestant Christianity have done so to the feminist, the liberal, and the homosexual. This is not something Jesus endorses because He never saw people – no matter how far they have spiritually wandered from God – as the enemy. Contrarily, Jesus saw them as God's special treasures who are loved so deeply by the Father but in need of redemption, reconciliation and forgiveness with the Father, with others, and with themselves. Driscoll further elaborates, "[postmodernism] is simply another culture that we should seek to redeem and transform by the power of the gospel."⁸¹

Christian churches need to see the openness toward spiritual friendships and conversations with the postmodern generation who is open to spiritual matters, as illustrated by the popularity of the television show *X-Files*. At the same time, the postmodern generation can follow down the spiritual pathway of divorcing God out of life (a spiritual option). Still, churches need to see postmodernism's openness to engage

⁸⁰Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation: Reaching Out Without Selling Out* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 161.

⁸¹Ibid.

authentically in spiritual conversations. These are spiritual times in which we live, and postmodern people are seeking for spiritual conversations. They do not believe that the “church” has the people in which to converse with in spiritual matters.

Also, Christian churches need to recognize the challenge posed to Christian faith by postmodernism. There can be no compromise with postmodern’s tendency toward relativism and pluralism, whether radical or moderate in nature. Brewer rightly points out that churches need to avoid the “slippery slope of theological compromise in order to remain contemporary.”⁸² Churches must avoid seeking to be “relevant” at the expense of Christian history, belief, and theology. “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and **blown about by every wind of doctrine**, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming”⁸³ Through the early ages of church, the methods may have changed to reach each generation; however, the message or beliefs never did. The early church was not blown around by earthly philosophies and vain doctrines. “The church, however, did not try to conform to the pattern of the world. It refused to compromise its principles. Far from being popular and socially acceptable, Christianity was despised...Thousands of Christians were martyred. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit kept bringing people to Christ.”⁸⁴

In the end, churches need to reach out with love as missionaries. Churches must reclaim the missionary spirit of the apostles and the early church which lovingly but discerningly engaged culture at a time that overlaps with ours through the connection of relativism, plurality, and skepticism. The wind of twentieth-first century postmodern belief is not something new for the Gospel. Features of postmodern thought have entered

⁸²Brewer, *Postmodernism*, 54.

⁸³Ephesians 4:14 NRS (New Revised Standard). Bold emphasis by author.

⁸⁴Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 230.

people's lives in the past; however, the message of the kingdom advanced through the missionary spirit of people who had encountered the grace and love of God in and through Christ's teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection. Churches must think like missionaries as they enter the mission field and engage culture. For the missionary who enters Buddhist regions, specific cultural questions must be asked so that communication can take place with the native people and people groups. The same holds true for the missionary who enters a Muslim region or a Hindu region.

Thinking as a missionary requires cultural questions to be asked by any congregation who desires to transition into a missional congregation. Questions lead to greater knowledge and understanding of the times. The point of cultural questions is to educate the church members and leaders so that relationships can be formed and communication can occur towards postmodernists. Jesus engaged people effectively through questions – the right questions that got to the primary issue: the spiritual need of the person. Jesus recognized the power of the right question asked so that relationship could begin initially. These questions of Jesus were always asked in the context of the person asking Jesus a question. Consequently, dialogue happened between Jesus and a diverse and eclectic group of people that ranged from a religious insider (Nicodemus) to an ethnic outsider (the Samaritan woman).

Dialogue cannot happen if postmoderns are treated as the enemy, or the congregation and its leaders bunker in from culture with a separatist ideology (which is directly opposed to the Incarnation). This approach to culture only fosters a spirit and environment which is not conducive to effective ministry with persons shaped by various winds of doctrine.

Communication will be essential if churches are going to be able to relationally connect with postmodern people. This will not happen if fundamental, core essentials of the faith are abandoned or reinterpreted (i.e., reinvented).⁸⁵ This will be a great temptation for many churches, especially those who are currently struggling or dying. Church people must be able to relate to people in a specific context. They must be able to dialogue with people even if their morals and ethics are not Christian. If churches cannot do this, then they will dance with the dinosaurs and not seize tomorrow for God.

Summary

For some time, contemporary culture in North America has been changing. These changes date to the early twentieth century and continue to happen today in the early twenty-first century. Some cultural historians descriptively call this time of change “postmodernism” while other scholars prefer less precise and more dynamic descriptors, such as “emerging culture.” No matter what this time period of cultural and global change is called, people inside and outside the church are recognizing that the times are different. For this purpose of this project, this author frames cultural discussion as postmodernism.

⁸⁵Contrary to this position is the writings of John Shelby Spong and Marcus J Borg. Their position is to reinterpret Christian belief. Spong writes, “I think the time has come for the Church to invite its people into a frightening journey into the mystery of God and to stop proclaiming that somehow the truth of God is still bound by either our literal scriptures or our literal creeds” *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999) , 21. He describes his intellectual view as an attempt to “articulate a vision of Christianity so radically reformulated that it can live in this brave new world” *A New Christianity for A New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and How A New Faith is Being Born* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002) , xxi. The brave new world is postmodernism. Espousing similar views, Borg proposes the “re-visioning of the Christian tradition” *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to A More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999) , 5. In light of Borg’s and Spong’s reinvention of Christian belief and tradition, several critiquing and evaluative questions emerge. What are the foundations of Christian thought? What can be called Christian belief? Is there intellectual reflection that goes beyond the boundary of Christian thought? A full critique is beyond the scope of this project.

What are we – the Church – to make of postmodern culture? This question is not easy to answer because of the lack of any formalized and academic definition to describe this cultural shift. The scholarly voices of postmodernism range eclectically. A single voice does not exist to capsule postmodern thinking for every postmodernist. The same goes for descriptions of postmodernism. Christian futurist Leonard Sweet has one understanding through life rings, whereas Mass Communications professor Craig Detweiler and Popular Culture professor Barry Taylor describe postmodernism through various “post” words.

No matter how postmodernism is described by scholars, pastors, or missionaries, all areas of life are affected, including life in the local and global church. What a person believes is impacted. How a person views reality is impacted. How a person ethically lives is impacted. How a person sees truth is impacted. How a person understands personal identity is impacted. There is no area of life that remains outside the shaping and forming influence of postmodernism. This influence is both subtle and observable to people inside and outside the church. One danger for Christian believers is to believe they remain free from the influence of postmodern culture. People in the church need to see the positive and negative characteristics of this cultural change.

On the negative side, we as Christ’s followers need to see that postmodernism does not produce abundant life, the life Jesus came to give. There is contradiction in the philosophical claims. There is an atmosphere of emotional disorientation that emerges from the implications of postmodernity. There is a crisis in knowing (epistemology) and reality in the postmodern world. There is no constructive proposal from the philosophy

that encourages living. There is a relativizing tendency. These negative evaluations must not be ignored by the Christian community, but neither should the positive aspects.

On the positive side, postmodernism expounds a belief that human reason does not hold all the answers to life's questions, and knowledge is not always good. The marginalized voices gain a hearing in postmodern times, and the elevation of the autonomous "self" which occurred during modernity becomes decreased while the importance of community increases. Postmodern thought recognizes that truth can be manipulated by individuals or groups of people, and science cannot hold all the knowledge so mystery is returned to the sciences.

Postmodernism, as well as the cultural and social change since the 1960s, has impacted churches and caused certain effects: disorientation, ineffectiveness, loss of identity, and loss of purpose. These effects are real and dramatic no matter the membership size of the congregation. Churches are called to live in a postmodern world and thus must minister in a culture that requires effective responses from churches. Whatever reaction churches choose to respond will directly effect the effectiveness of their witness and ministry in the twentieth-first century. The decision can either be good or bad by the leadership in local churches. Key to effective, postmodern ministry will be communication in all areas of ministry: worship, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, and ministry. Every area of ministry needs to be able to communicate effectively with people in a postmodern world.

CHAPTER 4

STATISTICS: STATE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Warning Signals

In the contemporary church life in America, warning signs are emerging rather rapidly regarding the state of the North American church. George Barna's *2005 State of the Church* reports that the number of "unchurched adults has gone unchanged since the turn of the millennium, but is considerably higher than figures from the early Nineties."¹ Adding to this situation is the growing number of people who have never experienced church at all. This group of people can be called "never-churched" and come from the postmodern generations.

What this author can add to this picture, as observed over the past eight years of pastoral ministry, is the continuing trend of virtually no conversion growth happening among United Methodist churches throughout Nebraska. In other words, church growth continues to come from persons or families connected with "church culture," that is people who have a connection with mainline churches, not from people in postmodern culture. There seems to be a loss and lack of missionary concern for reaching out to people beyond church culture. Also, the spirit of secularism, consumerism, materialism, individualistic autonomy, and nominalism seems alive and well in congregations of all membership and worship sizes. Too much of postmodern and modern ethics and moral values have infiltrated inside churches, leading to this reality: "Churches are going out of

¹George Barna, *2005 State of the Church* (Ventura, CA: The Barna Group, 2005) , 8.

business. Why? Because they refuse to change.”² For those dying congregations, the dance with the dinosaurs continues as they head toward extinction. For those dying congregations, seizing tomorrow is effectively gone.

Descriptive Analysis of Dying Congregations

What do dying and declining congregations look like? Dying congregations function similarly no matter which denominational affiliation they are. Dying and struggling congregations look and feel the same, sharing similar beliefs and behaviors. What has lead to these dire circumstances is not primarily a matter of denominational affiliation, ministry practices (although declining and dying congregations do suffer from ineffective ministry), church leadership (although leadership takes on certain styles and characteristics in struggling churches), or motivation (although motivations do take a specific form in dying churches).

The current declension among all dying churches in the landscape of North American Christianity is a matter of lost ecclesial identity or being. These churches have forgotten what it means to be the church. Paul Nixon, United Methodist Director of Congregational Development, writes, “I see spiritual amnesia, a vague cluelessness about who we are and what God has called us to be and do.”³ All dying churches at some point have forgotten their ecclesial identity (i.e., being a people sent out on a mission). Many patterns of dysfunctional behavior have emerged slowly through the years until the present spiritual and ecclesial conditions have so firmly grasped churches that dying has

²Tom Clegg and Warren Bird, *Lost in America: How You and Your Church Can Impact the World Next Door* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2001) , 25.

³Paul A. Nixon, *Healing Spiritual Amnesia: Remembering What It Means to Be the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004) , 16. He presently serves in the Alabama-West Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church.

become the formational identity. In the process, evangelism, discipleship, ministry, worship, organizational structure, and community morph into a dysfunctional shape that no longer has any biblical or spiritual foundations.

Consequently, a survival and in-focused mentality overtakes the lives of the churches and firmly entrenches church leaders and members down a pathway of dying and ultimately death through church closures. Rather than engaging in mission, the focus turns to maintenance of the status quo. Bishop Claude E. Payne fittingly describes this difference between a mission-minded and maintenance-minded congregation: “Today’s maintenance-centered Church ministers primarily to the faithful... It is not particularly attractive to the unchurched except philosophically, paying only lip service to the idea of evangelism. In the maintenance church, both clergy and laity lose sight of their obligation to make disciples.”⁴

In a maintenance and survival situation, no room for change would be allowed because that would break the homeostasis of the dying community. The unifying philosophy becomes one of personal survival and inward-focused ministry. In effect, the pastors become a hospice chaplain who cares for the dying and sick members. Because of the dysfunctional milieu of control and power, the pastors no longer are allowed or given permission to lead congregations as a Spirit formed and Spirit-filled visionary leaders. This profile of dying churches has emerged over this author’s experience of pastoring them.

This author agrees with Thomas Bandy’s descriptive assessment of a declining church: “The declining church system is all about belonging to an institution. Some

⁴Bishop C.E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley, *Reclaiming the Great Commission: A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) , 23.

people are enrolled, informed, nominated, supervised, and kept. They experience and maintain an ecclesiastical heritage. They begin as members and end as guardians. Most of the public, however, learns that they can access the mission of the church...without the church.”⁵ Many profiles of dying churches of all denominations exist in North America, but they all exhibit unified signs of declension as identified by Bandy. These churches are fast approaching a “defining moment” as to decide whether they are going to head toward extinction or prepare to seize tomorrow.

Nature of Declining and Dying Congregations

The nature of this decline is foremost a spiritual one. At some point in dying churches a personal relationship with God gets replaced by religion and religious duty. God, no longer the focus of the congregation’s heart, gets replaced by idols, especially the idol of religiosity, and every aspect of church life gets spiritually affected, especially worship. The words of Isaiah bring a correct and just indictment: “‘I am sick of your sacrifices,’ says the LORD. ‘Don’t bring me any more burnt offerings! I don’t want the fat from your rams or other animals. I don’t want to see the blood from your offerings of bulls and rams and goats’” (Isa. 1:11). Devoid of a vibrant and faithful relationship with God turns worship into a dead pious act as well as turning all other aspects of church life into perfunctory performance.

The second nature of dying churches is an emotional one. There is no joy in people’s hearts. A spirit of depression and resignation exist among the people and the leaders, clergy or lay persons equally. Sometimes anger becomes the primary form of

⁵Thomas G. Bandy, *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001) , 48.

expression, which only masks a deeper and the more problematic emotional response of depression. Dying congregations are depressed emotionally, and this negative emotion permeates all life, producing an environment in which no person, either modern or postmodern, desires to be around. When this emotional state captures the congregation, this deathward spiral toward extinction moves quickly. Programmatic approaches to final “solutions” only exacerbate the situation. The future of a depressed congregation remains dim, but not hopeless because, as Jeremiah writes, “‘O Israel, come back to me,’ says the LORD. ‘If you will throw away your detestable idols and go astray no more, and if you will swear by my name alone, and begin to live good, honest lives and uphold justice, then you will be a blessing to the nations of the world, and all people will come and praise my name’” (Jer. 4:1). Congregations are not beyond hope, however.

The third facet of dying churches is the social dimension in terms of relating to other churches. Barna makes this astute reflection: “The Church rarely benefits from the potential power produced by its massive number of people because most local churches operate in isolation from each other and lack a sense of joint mission.”⁶ Many churches in America have embedded the idea of the autonomous self into the DNA code of its being and existence, which is ironic for United Methodist churches who are united in a connectional existence. Because of this, churches see other churches as competitors who are trying to attract newcomers to their “denominational” product. For dying churches, newcomers become a human resource who will participate in the life of the that church (i.e., serve on committees) and not their competitors. Newcomers to the church are seen as the next generation to keep the heritage alive. This social problem points to the lack of a missional ecclesiology and a biblical understanding of the people of God.

⁶Barna, *2005 State of the Church*, 50.

The fourth aspect is ecclesial. Dying churches turn inward as an attempt to survive and preserve the church's heritage. As a result, the people fail to see themselves as a people being sent out into the world by Christ to participate in the reign of God. Ecclesial identity turns into one of building and heritage. A genuine loss of identity happens slowly over time in these churches. Soon, they can no longer relate to people in their community, or to postmodern people in their world. When churches get to this place, they are neither "in the world" nor "of the world" anymore. They are simply "out of the world." An inward ecclesiology leads to such a drastic theological condition in which the congregations no longer know how to even exist in a postmodern world. The hardness of heart can get so bad in some church members that they prefer the church to close rather than experiencing change that leads to abundant life as Jesus promised.

The last characteristic of dying and struggling churches is historical loss in terms of the denominational relationship. In these churches, an inevitable disconnect happens between the churches and the denomination, which may have a strong heritage of evangelistic witness. These churches simply lose touch with their denomination spiritually and historically. This is another aspect of theological and ecclesial identity loss. This author can only speak from a United Methodist perspective, a perspective that is shared by other pastors, seminar professors, denominational officials, and Wesleyan scholars.

Presently, there is a great concern about the historical loss of connection with the Wesleyan tradition. Dying churches fail to see their denominational connection with the Wesley brothers, John and Charles. Many reform movements exist within the United

Methodist Church today.⁷ The Confessing Movement purpose “is to contend for the apostolic faith within the United Methodist Church and seek to reclaim and reaffirm the church's faith in Wesleyan terms.”⁸ Exacerbating this contemporary loss of historical connection is the postmodern world which sees no connection with history, thus fostering an attitude of no denominational loyalty whatsoever. A deep suspicion of history exists in the view of postmodern people. This is a deep problem for denominational officials in The United Methodist Church. For dying United Methodist Churches, (John) Wesley’s worry is coming true. “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.”⁹

In summary, many struggling and dying churches are dancing with the dinosaurs because of the fundamental losses experienced by those congregations. Thus they are unable to seize tomorrow’s opportunities in ministry amidst a postmodern world that has fundamentally changed America in all areas of life. These losses are spiritual, emotional, social, theological, and historical in nature. Until congregations’ relationships with God are restored, there is little hope of seeing reform because the core problem is a spiritual one. Additionally, seeing a revitalized spirit among United Methodist congregations is not easy task because of the institutional processes. It may require a direct intervention of God’s reviving work to change this current declension in which many congregations have lost their love of God.

⁷Here are helpful renewal sites with links: Concerned Methodists (www.fayettevilleonline.com/concerned-methodists/); Good News (www.goodnewsmag.org/); Renew Network for Christian Women (<http://www.renewnetwork.org/>); The Confessing Movement (www.confessingumc.org). These sites were accessed on August 12, 2005.

⁸See www.confessingumc.org (accessed August 5, 2005).

⁹John Wesley, “Thoughts upon Methodism” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 9: The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design. Bicentennial ed., ed. Rupert E. Davies. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989) , 527.

Extent of the Problem

The extent of the problem is revealed through the statistical analysis of trends in Nebraska United Methodist Churches. The use of statistics is a difficult means of any evaluation because numbers can be interpreted toward particular views or specific and biased interpretations. Statistics means something to every interpreter, so multiple interpretations exist in a set of data. Yet, numbers do serve a purpose and can reveal or indicate emerging patterns or trends if cautiously interpreted. Reserved interpretation is a recommended means to understand demographics. Another caveat is that membership numbers may not be accurate because of numerical inflation of membership. The motivation for such behavior varies, but “looking good” before superiors, even in a religious setting, can be a pathway toward career advancement. In other words, some pastors may look at statistics through materialistic motivations rather than through missional and kingdom concerns. As a result, membership numbers may not reveal how congregations are genuinely functioning. The most important number is worship attendance because it is from the people worshipping who will give faithfully and serve in different capacities in leadership.

For the United Methodist Church, a gradual trend of membership loss has emerged from 1999 to 2002. In 1999, church membership stood at 8,365,816. In 2000, membership dropped to 8,258,352.¹⁰ What the data shows is a small quantitative decline in membership. What this data does not show is the more important and critical assessment. What percentage of the people is nominal in their membership? In their worship attendance? In their faith? With membership over eight million, the membership

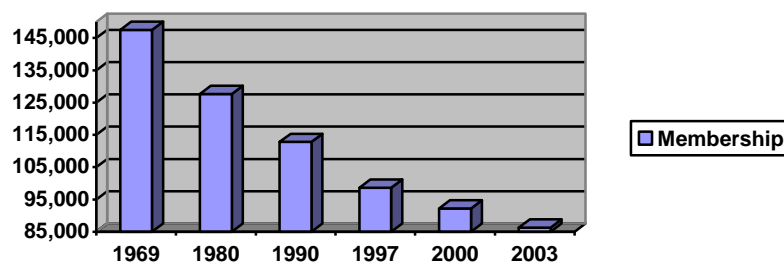
¹⁰*General Minutes of the Annual Conferences of The United Methodist Church* (Evanston, IL: The General Council on Finance and Administration, 2003) , 28.

statistics may reveal a healthy denomination; however, this is a deceiving interpretation of the denomination's current state of spiritual vibrancy.

A full examination of the denomination needs to happen if a complete picture of the United Methodist Church is to be formed as to its vitality and spiritual health.¹¹ For this author, the Nebraska Conference serves as the primary means of interpreting the life of the denomination because this conference serves as this author's ministry setting and, in this author's belief, reflects the state of the denomination truthfully. Commentary and critical reflection are to be made within the limits of observational and descriptive analysis as emerging from demographic data in Nebraska.

The overall picture that emerges in Nebraska is a negative one of numerical decline and loss, which ultimately points to more a profound decline in ecclesial identity or being. There is a direct connection between membership loss and the loss of identity in many declining congregations across the state. United Methodist churches have lost 61,272 members since 1969. This trend has been progressing (see Figure 4.1)

Figure 4.1
Trends in Total Membership¹²



¹¹This is beyond the scope of this paper. Out of clarity of purpose, the focus must center on this author's present ministry assignment. The statistical data comes from this author's research through the *Nebraska Conference Journals*. All tables and charts are created by the author from the accumulated data. Interpretation is formed by the collected data along with pastoral experiences in Nebraska. In this author's view, what is happening in Nebraska among United Methodist churches reflects trends nationally through other United Methodist congregations as well as mainline and independent churches.

¹²Original, statistical research by the author from *Nebraska Conference Journals*, 1969 to 2005.

In looking at the data, what emerges is that United Methodist churches in Nebraska keep losing ground each year, each decade. Only in the year 1985 does this declining trend stop. During that year, there was **no** membership growth at all. That time period appears to be an anomaly since this declining trend continued in 1986 and continues today. 1997 was the year in which membership dropped below 100,000 for the first time. There appears no reason to believe that this will change in the near future.

This trend of declining church membership reflects the opposite growth as experienced by the state of Nebraska: 1,637,000 (1975), 1,705,000 (2000), 1,761,000 (2005), 1,850,000 (2015), and 1,930,000 (2025).¹³ What is being experienced by United Methodist churches is not being experienced by the state. With all the geographic isolated areas, the impression of Nebraska can be misleading. There is population growth, but specific geographic areas throughout the state will not see population growth due to the isolation and increasing economic transition. Nevertheless, while the state continues to grow in population, church membership continues to decline. (For further study and detailed analysis, see Appendix 4 “Membership Figures” and Appendix 5 “Membership Losses.”)

Noticeable is just how extensive that the breakdown in membership losses through the decades is from analyzing the data. Most membership losses occurred in the 1970s and 1990s, 17,806 and 19,901 respectively, but the 1980s was close behind. The 2000s have not completed yet, but what is interesting to note is the average loss of members per year. The 2000s lead all decades with a yearly average loss of 2,032 members. This is a disturbing statistical trend in the life of the denomination, especially

¹³United States Census Bureau, “Projections of Total Populations of States: 1995 – 2025,” Washington D.C.: United States Census Bureau, 2007), <http://www.census.gov/population/projections/state/stpipop.txt>. (accessed May 18, 2006).

one whose spiritual founder had such a passionate and abandonment to participate with Jesus in the mission field. Two further trends illustrate just how extensive the missional problem among United Methodists is today in Nebraska. One, the average loss of members per year continues to escalate. Two, the average percentage of yearly loss of members continues to grow as well. (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2

Losses Through the Decade¹⁴

	2000s	1990s	1980s	1970s
Total Membership Loss	8,128	19,901	15,437	17,806
Number of 2,000 + Yearly Losses	3	5	3	1
Average Loss Per Year	2,032	1,990	1544	1780
Average % of Yearly Loss	2.23	1.89	1.26	1.28

In summary, the data leads to a revealing picture: the prevalent decline of church membership in United Methodist churches in Nebraska. This decline began in the late 1960s and continues in the 2000s. This problem of decline and dying churches remains prevalent in the life of the denomination in Nebraska. It appears that many congregations are dancing with the dinosaurs, and are not ready to face tomorrow, or even today.

A closer examination of the year 2003 supports the view that not only is dying prevalent among churches, but it may beyond church reform for many churches and directly a matter of revival. The Nebraska Conference is presently divided into seven administrative districts, as it was in 2003. The districts are: Central, Lincoln, Northeast, Omaha, South Central, Southeast, and Southwest. Each district has a District

¹⁴Original, statistical research by the author from *Nebraska Conference Journals*, 1969 to 2005.

Superintendent. The accumulated data shows positive growth in membership, negative growth, and no growth. (see Figures 4. 3, 4.4, and 4.5).

Figure 4.3

“Membership Growth”¹⁵

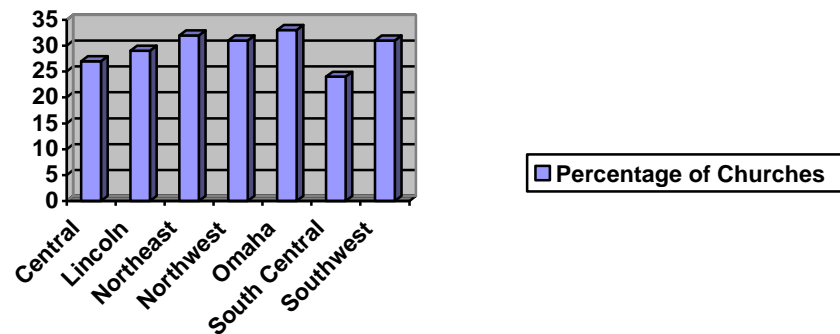
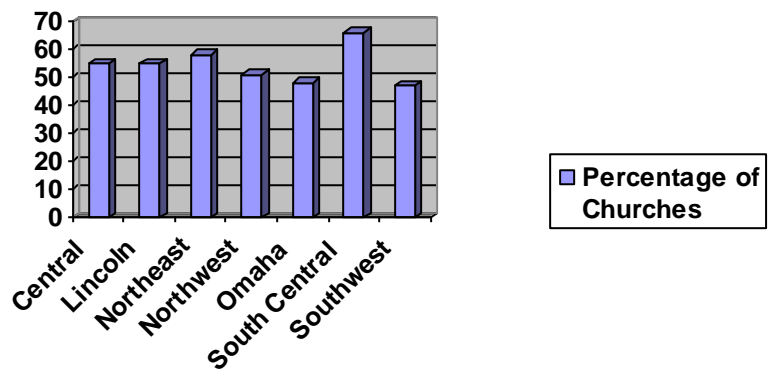


Figure 4.4

“Membership Losses”¹⁶

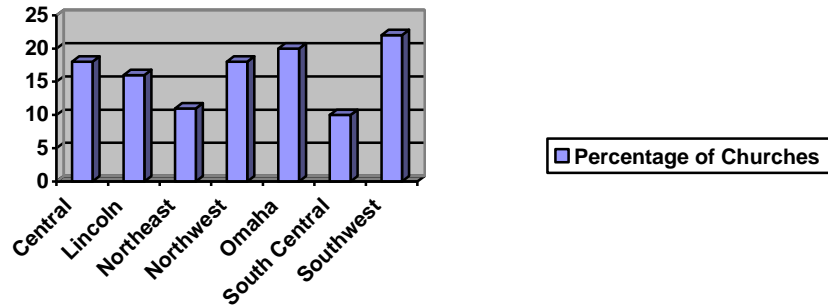


¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

Figure 4.5

“No Growth”¹⁷



The data confirms a constant, historical pattern of declining membership growth which continues throughout United Methodist Churches in Nebraska today. There is also a high percentage of churches that are not experiencing any membership growth. No district shows a membership loss for the 2003 year less than 40 percent. What needs to be understood is that, at least in United Methodist congregations, this accelerated decline in membership has several sources: withdrawal, removal, transfer, and death. Despite these “normal” losses, the data raises critical concerns about the future of many churches. How long can churches experience any amount of loss, normal or otherwise? What happens when the generation that is committed to the churches dies off? Why is there not a stronger sense of urgency about the future of the church? Whatever the reason for the membership loss, the impact upon the churches is still the same. Loss is loss, and churches continue to struggle and head down the pathway of dying, death, and the dance with the dinosaurs.

¹⁷Ibid.

The Need for Congregational Reform

Christian futurist Leonard Sweet writes, “But the choice is ours. Will we, as some say, ‘rest in peace’? Or will we once again, ‘rise in power’? Will it be death or resurrection?”¹⁸ Implicit within Sweet’s comment is a desperate need for reform. He clearly sees the need, but will spiritually dead congregations see it as well? Sweet is not the only one who notices a desperate need for reform among United Methodist churches. Wesleyan Studies professor Paul Chilcote writes, “We need renewal. We need to learn how to speak in God’s love again. It is in this spirit of urgency that this volume is offered for the renewal of the church.”¹⁹ This author shares the same spirit of Sweet and Chilcote. Reform is desperately needed among ALL dying churches in any denomination.

Sweet and Chilcote’s recognition of the need for congregational reform reflects a similar concern by Wesley in the eighteenth century Church of England. He saw the Methodist movement as a renewing work of God’s Holy Spirit in a people who had fallen into nominal faith. Wesley’s understanding of the need for revival actually extends back to the birth of the church. In his *The Wisdom of God’s Counsels*, Wesley understood that the church’s “happy state did not continue long”²⁰ after Pentecost before the need of God’s reviving work. He then historically traces the need for reform through the Christian church during the apostolic age, concluding with the state of churches in Revelation. According to Wesley, what plagued the early church along with every other

¹⁸Leonard Sweet, *11 Genetic Ways to Spiritual Awakening* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998) , 16.

¹⁹Paul Chilcote, ed., *The Wesleyan Tradition: A Paradigm for Renewal* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002) , 10.

²⁰John Wesley, “The Wisdom of God’s Counsel” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2: Sermons II 34 – 70. Bicentennial ed., ed. Albert C. Outler. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985) , 555.

church since the apostolic age is “the mystery of iniquity.”²¹ This need for reform continued through Christian history as sin has continued its presence in the life of God’s people. For Wesley, there has never been a time in which God’s people did not need the reviving work of God, including the people of the United Methodist Church today. Wesley would have agreed heartily with Sweet and Chilcote. Reform is desperately needed today.

Summary

This chapter set forth a demographic and descriptive analysis of the United Methodist church in Nebraska and dying and declining churches in general. Currently, many statistical warning signs exist to indicate the real state of the church throughout North America. Some of these statistical indicators relate specifically to United Methodism; others relate to Christian congregations.

In general, dead and dying congregations (and denominations by extension) of all denominations share common traits: loss of historical connection, ineffective ministry practices, poor church leadership, and unbiblical motivation or reason for existing. Ultimately, dying churches reach a point of losing their missional identity. Consequently, a survival mentality pervades the life of the church. These congregations are heading toward a “defining moment” in which they are going to seize tomorrow and the missional opportunities God gives the church, or head into extinction.

The extent of the problem for United Methodists in Nebraska is one of crisis and desperation. From a statistical standpoint, the overall picture remains negative. While

²¹John Wesley, “The Mystery of Iniquity” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2: Sermons II 34 – 70. Bicentennial ed., ed. Albert C. Outler. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985) , 452.

total membership continues to decline, membership growth continues to be limited to a few churches. Membership losses are being experienced by many churches, large and small in worship attendance. No growth is happening in many United Methodist churches. In the end, congregational reform or revitalization is desperately needed.

CHAPTER 5

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Relationship to Culture

How do we as followers of Christ relate to postmodern culture? Specifically, “What kinds of relationships do the churches want with culture?”¹ In answering this missional question, answers will come to the core questions on this project: “Will many of our congregations, like the dinosaurs, become extinct?” (Easum) and “Is your church ready to seize tomorrow?” (Sweet). How this question of relating to postmodern culture is answered determines answers to the project’s core questions.

Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr provides a helpful typology, albeit with critical discernment.² For Niebuhr, Christian believers follow five paths in relating to culture: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture.³

First, “Christ against culture” sees culture as hopelessly corrupted by sin. Therefore, God’s church must reject culture in every aspect. Christian believers either

¹Leonard Sweet, “Introduction: Garden, Park, Glen, Meadow,” in *The Church in the Emerging Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003) , 13.

²Leonard Sweet in the introduction to *The Church in the Emerging Culture* poses three problems with Niebuhr’s typology: (1) “Christianity began in premodernity, not modernity or postmodernity” (p. 16); (2) “Niebuhr understood change in incremental, not exponential terms” (p. 16-17); and (3) “Niebuhr failed to consider what the relationship of Christ and culture might look like from outside Christendom...” (p. 17-18). For other critical remarks, see Darrell Guder, ed., *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) , 115 – 116. He points out four criticisms of Niebuhr’s typology. Despite these critical remarks Niebuhr’s typology can still be used as an entry point into the discussion of Christ and culture.

³H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1951).

belong to Christ or the culture. Loyalty can never be in both. Second, “Christ of culture” affirms both Christ and culture without having to deny any necessary opposition of the two. Jesus becomes a great moral and social justice hero, the highest aspiration of culture. Third, “Christ above culture” neither rejects nor assimilates culture. Christian believers can appreciate both Christ and the culture; however, when a choice is to be made, Christ, the Lord of culture, takes precedence. Fourth, “Christ and culture in paradox” presents a view that Christ and culture are opposite in nature: good and bad. A strong, paradoxical tension exists within believers’ hearts regarding culture because of its dualistic nature. Living out the values in the kingdom at times brings conflict with culture. Fifth, “Christ the transformer of culture” sees Christ as superior to culture but also as the redemptive agent of culture. Christian believers are God’s coworkers in this work of redemption.

In answering the question of how Christ’s followers relate to postmodern culture, we must first learn from Jesus! In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “God did not send his Son into the world **to condemn it** [bold emphasis this author], but to save it” (3:17). This illustrates the passion of the Father’s heart and primary commitment to rescue and restore humanity – postmodern humanity – from its present state of sinful bondage and woundedness. Our mission as Christ’s followers is not to condemn people in postmodern culture because Jesus does not call his followers out into the world with a condemning, judgmental spirit. Jesus calls his followers out into the world. A condemning attitude – one in which only sees sin and not good in postmodern culture – will lead followers of Christ to relate to culture in way that is opposite to the spirit of Christ.

Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “My purpose is to give life in all its fullness” (10:10). How can this happen through Christ’s representatives if his followers cannot

relationally communicate with postmodern people? If Christ's people, the Body of Christ, are sent out on a mission (to give people Jesus), it will be necessary to talk to people where they are in life, even if their lifestyles are not reflecting what God intends their lives to be. To enter into the lives of postmodern people will require their permission, which will not happen if postmodern people do not allow Christ's followers into their lives. If postmodern people are to have life, then we as Christ's representatives on earth need to hang out with people to form loving relationships and friendships, and to engage in spiritual conversations. To accomplish the mission, we as Christ's followers will need to form engaging relationships with postmodern culture that give Christ to people, who face much condemning in their lives.

In the process of carrying out this mission in this postmodern world, we as Christ's ambassadors also need to remember that there is a fundamental separation between the reign of God and postmodern culture. The reign or kingdom has different ethics and moral stances from the postmodern world, which is held in a subtle but not necessarily tension-filled balance. Jesus offers two important comments. First, "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19). Second, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).⁴ Jesus recognizes that his followers will be living in a specific culture, in a specific time and in a specific place but the world and all the global cultures are not the real issue. The kingdom is the real issue.

Jesus desires that we as Christ's mission team make discerning decisions in how we relate to the postmodern world because followers of Christ are not "of this world" as

⁴These biblical quotations come from New King James version of the Bible as accessed on www.crosswalk.com (August 5, 2005).

the kingdom is not “of this world.” From the gospel’s view, no tension with postmodern culture exists. Tension between the kingdom and the postmodern world only exists from the view of postmodern culture. In other words, the gospel is not in tension with the world; the world is in tension with the gospel because demands made by Jesus require a decision to leave behind the values and ethics that oppose kingdom living. This seems to be Jesus’ point as He calls us to be salt, a city, and light (Matt. 5:13-16). Jesus calls His followers to make a decision to live for the kingdom without losing the missional commitment to relate and communicate with people in this postmodern world, and this requires a spirit of discernment. We as Christ’s followers are called to a life of discerning engagement with the world.

Paul shares a similar view with Christ in that Christ’s followers are to be a discerning presence among culture while totally committed to kingdom living. Through Paul’s kingdom teachings a clear sense of how Paul relates to culture emerges.⁵ Paul writes about the following themes: being “alive to God” (Rom. 6:11-14); living life in the Spirit as opposed to the flesh (Rom. 8:9-17); glorifying God in the body (1 Cor. 6:12-20); walking by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26); being a new creation (Gal. 6:11-17); leading a life worthy of the calling (Eph. 4:1-10); living as lights in the world (Phil. 2:14-18); putting to death what is earthly (Col. 3:5-11); and holding fast what is good (1 Thess. 5:12-22).

Implied in those aforementioned blocks of Pauline teaching is a missional commitment to make discerning decisions when it comes to living in the postmodern culture. Christ’s followers must live differently. It remains impossible to be alive to God

⁵These Pauline themes come from Fred O. Frances and J. Paul Samplly, eds., *Pauline Parallels*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992). In this book, the authors have arranged in a systematic manner the writings of Paul into thematic blocks of unified writings, with each labeled with a title. This author is using selective titles as an interpretive scheme to understand Paul’s view of culture.

while incorporating postmodern values and ethics that oppose kingdom living. Missional people can live in the world and communicate without sacrificing Jesus' command to live like Him and make ethical choices upon based kingdom teachings and values. How can God be glorified when God's people look no different from the people in postmodern culture? In the end, Paul relates to culture but not at the expense of living the kingdom life. "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is" (Rom. 12:2).

The *Message* says it well:

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.⁶

For Paul, a necessary distinction between kingdom living and living in the culture must be maintained in a delicate balance with mission. In essence, Paul is saying, "Do not conform to the culture's ethics or morals or values." But this does not mean that Paul is recommending that Christ's followers treat culture as an enemy, or fail to see the good in culture, or devalue persons while living the kingdom life. No loving relationship with postmodern people will occur if those dynamics happen. Christ's missional people will need to follow Paul in discerning what is acceptable and what is not. Discernment needs to be done humbly and gently.

Christ's followers in the early period of church history faced the same issue as Jesus, Paul, and followers today. They had to make crucial, discerning decisions regarding their relationship with their culture. These early followers of Christ had to

⁶Romans 12:2 *The Message*

decide at what point would they conform to culture and not conform in order to be faithful to kingdom living. The *Epistle to Diognetus* reports:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. (5.1-2)

But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. (5.4)

They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. (5.5)

They are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. (5.15-16)

To sum up all in one word—what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world.⁷ (6.1-3)

In relating to postmodern culture, this author's approach stands in agreement with the early church, Jesus, and Paul, who follow a discerning engagement and conversational encounter with culture which is not seen as the "enemy" or which is completely devoid of anything good all the while avoiding absorbing all the postmodern values and ethics that oppose kingdom living and the life Christ calls us to live. This would be the sixth category that this author would add to Niebuhr's typology: "Christ's discerning engagement with culture."

⁷The *Epistle to Diognetus* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 26-27.

This discerning engagement approach in encountering postmodernism (as well as modernism) remains biblical without compromising with postmodernism and certain underpinnings that stand against the biblical worldview and kingdom living. Research professor Kevin J. Vanhoozer identifies five approaches to postmodernism. They include denying, defying, deifying, discussing, and disputing.⁸ This author's approach recognizes the importance to maintain an uncompromising biblical worldview without destroying the ability to relate to postmodern people and people of other religious "faiths." A discerning engagement with culture maintains biblical fidelity without denying or ignoring postmodernism, without demonizing it as the enemy, without deifying it uncritically through biblical evaluation, or without compromise.

Today, there needs to be an authentic and genuine encounter with postmodern people that will value them as God's creation – God's special treasures who are deeply loved – even if broken, wounded and sinful in thought and deed. Disputing with postmodern people relationally will fail to gain a hearing for the Gospel. To "log on" to these people's lives will require the risk of engaging them in a postmodern culture that is increasingly hostile to "church" but open to Jesus. Jesus sends us out into this world of postmodern culture the way God sent him out into the world because "God has work for us to do and we cannot accomplish it living outside of culture."⁹

⁸Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress: Christian Thinking on and about the Post/Modern Way in Myron B. Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005) , 72 – 73. Vanhoozer favors a disputing engagement with postmodernism. This author sees this approach helpful in an academic context, but less helpful in a relational context. The idea of disputing carries with it images of combat and war, which are negative and not helpful in communicating with people who embrace postmodernism. While affirming Vanhoozer's critical and discerning spirit in seeing how features of postmodern are contrary to a biblical worldview, this author maintains a missional encounter with postmodernists that will require discerning engagement in a conversational manner.

⁹Chuck Smith Jr., *The End of the World as We Know It: Clear Directions for Bold and Innovative Ministry in A Postmodern World* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001) , 86.

With a missional understanding of whom we are as the people of God and with an engaging and discerning approach in relating to culture, we as a missional people are being sent out into the world to “understand the times” (1 Chron.12:32) as the sons of Issachar did. We as God’s missional team need to understand postmodern times so that discerning questions can be asked reflected upon, biblically and theologically. God’s missional team needs to make constant discerning decisions. Followers of Christ simply need to understand the postmodern world, and the people who are shaped ethically and morally by postmodernism.¹⁰

Ministry

What is ministry? Ministry is “God’s ministry from the very beginning.”¹¹ “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). The first act of creation shows the beginning of God in ministry. The act of creation is the ministry of God. The rest of chapter one in Genesis shows the imaginative and creative God in ministry. As Genesis continues, the ministry of God goes forward and comes to completion in the book of Revelation when all sin, death, and evil are defeated. All 66 books of the Bible witness to God’s glorious mission and ministry.

The ultimate expression of God’s ministry is Jesus Christ. God sent the Son to carry on ministry personally in the midst of a broken, wounded, and sinful world. “For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do what I want”

¹⁰This author recognizes that contemporary culture needs a nuanced understanding since postmodernism has not spread everywhere. See Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in A Postmodern Age* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), who writes, “the shift to postmodernism has not happened everywhere...There are still large pockets in North America where people live out their lives in much the same manner as their parents before the” (115). This missional approach of this project extends to all manifestations of culture.

¹¹Ray S. Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry: Forming Leaders for God’s People* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 9.

(John 6:38). This idea of “being sent” to do the ministry of God pervades Jesus’ consciousness, as recorded in the Gospel of John (see 5:24; 6:29; 6:44; 6:46; 6:57; 7:33; 8:18; 8:29; 12:44; 14:24; and 17:25). Jesus was “sent into the world to reveal and recover true humanity. Jesus demonstrated authenticity, integrity, love, and maturity.”¹²

Jesus the Son was sent by the God the Father, and we as Christ’s followers are sent by Him. “As you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world (John 17:18). “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). Twice in the Gospel accounts, Jesus sends out His followers into the world. One occurs in Mark 3:13-15; the other in Luke 10:1. These two examples serve as a reminder for us today that we as Christ’s followers are being sent by Jesus into the world as a people participating in the mission and ministry of God. This missional spirit of “being sent” needs to form our spirit and core identity (i.e., ecclesiology or how we understand ourselves as Christ’s followers) because we are reminded that “the sending [of Jesus] brings out the significance of the person of Christ and of what is done in him, namely that the Father speaks and acts by him.”¹³

Christ’s followers today are sent out into the world to make disciples. “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:14). For United Methodist Christians, “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena which discipleship-making occurs.”¹⁴ This is an evangelistic and social ministry for all United Methodist Christians and all Christians in every denomination and

¹²Ibid., 21.

¹³ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 74.

¹⁴ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 87.

independent faith tradition. John Wesley captured passionately this missional spirit of being sent into the world to make disciples, as he wrote, “I look upon the world as my parish.”¹⁵ Wesley took seriously Jesus’ command to make disciples. He also understood correctly that “the central purpose of the church is mission – God’s mission. The church is not called to live for itself but to live for others. It is called, like Christ, to give itself for the life of the world. It is not so much that the church has a mission or ministries; rather, the church is mission.”¹⁶

What is the nature of this ministry? The evangelistic and social ministry that followers of Christ are being sent into the world shares a unified essence among all people of faith down through the years. First, this ministry is to be an incarnational ministry. Second, this ministry is to be a servant ministry. Third, this ministry is to be an integrative ministry of evangelism and social justice.

“Incarnation” is a theological term “for the coming of God’s Son into the world as a human being.”¹⁷ God through Christ mysteriously entered human life to communicate from the Father a message of divine love, forgiveness, grace, compassion, and ultimately resurrection. Jesus immersed himself in people’s lives, and brought a real sense of hope and encouragement to people who were broken, wounded, and sinful. We as Christ’s followers are called to incarnate the life of Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in all that we do as a global church so that people will experience genuine, authentic, and loving relationships.

¹⁵John Wesley, “Journal and Diaries II” (1738-43) in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 19:Journal and Diaries II (1738-1743). Edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990) , 67.

¹⁶Paul Wesley Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesley’s Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004) , 94.

¹⁷Jack W. Hayford, gen. ed., *Hayford’s Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995) , 653.

As we look at the life of Jesus, we see that Jesus loved people. He entered their brokenness, woundedness, and sinfulness. Jesus cared about outcasts. All too often human attitudes toward the unlovely are varied, but often include bullying, blaming, despising, disdain, patronizing, joking about, or ignoring. Jesus calls His followers to new relationships, which means loving people in contemporary culture. Jesus sent a word of grace. To the woman with the hemorrhage, he spoke, “Daughter, be encouraged! Your faith has made you well” (Matt. 9:22). To the Roman officer he spoke, “I tell you the truth, I haven’t seen faith like this in all the land of Israel” (Matt. 8:10). To blind Bartimaeus, he spoke, “Go your way. Your faith has healed you” (Mark 10:52). Jesus cared. He loved and cared for lepers, prostitutes, invalids, the diseased, the possessed, the hated tax agents, ethnic minorities, revolutionaries, and sinners.

Jesus always started his ministry with people where they were. Each encounter with people throughout the Gospels shows Jesus communicating with people where they were in life. Some people were physically hungry. Others were spiritually hungry. Some were emotionally damaged human beings. Others were demon possessed. Some were grieving. One was physically dead and buried. In relating to people, Jesus met them in their culture. He did not wait until they initiated contact. Jesus went looking for people and twice sent his disciples into the world to do the same. (Far too long the church has attracted people to its worship and ministries. It is time for the church to go looking for people!) This is what incarnational ministry looks like: loving, caring, encouraging, communicating, and looking. Christian communities are to be an incarnational witness for Christ in postmodern times.

Missiologist leaders Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch provide helpful guidelines in carrying out the incarnational mission and ministry. They remind us, first of all, that the incarnation “provides us with the missional means by which the gospel can become a genuine part of a people group without damaging the innate cultural frameworks that provide that people group with meaning and history.”¹⁸ What this means is that too much of Western European thought and culture has permeated past missionary spread of the gospel that in the process native cultures were damaged -- some to the point of virtual extinction as a people group. Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin recognizes that past missionary activity had the spirit of imperialism which spread oppression rather than the freedom of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Missions had been corrupted by infiltrating too much Western European culture into native people’s culture. Commenting on missionary activity in China, he writes, “Chinese intellectuals rejected the invasion of missionaries in the nineteenth century partly at least on the ground that they brought with them a foreign culture.”¹⁹

While recognizing that the presence of the Gospel lives in culture in the sense of a specific historical and temporal location, Newbigin correctly understands that “what comes home to the heart of the hearer must really be the gospel, and not a product shaped by the mind of the hearer.”²⁰ The missionary must be mindful of a theological understanding of the Gospel which is grounded in the Bible, must be mindful of all cultural presuppositions in understanding God’s Word and culture, must be mindful of the mission of Christ, and must be mindful of motivations which should be grounded in

¹⁸Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) , 37.

¹⁹Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in A Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989) , 190.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 141.

the character and actions of Christ. Because of the continuing presence of sin, missionary activity, whether in a local community or global village, can be distorted into missionary action which is oppressive and exploitive. He points out that “we must always be ready to recognize that we have misrepresented the intention of Jesus because of our own interest.”²¹

Besides being aware of cultural presuppositions and motivations for missionary ministry, Newbigin suggests this question: “How can the gospel ‘come alive’ in all these different cultural contexts, and still be the same authentic gospel?”²² This is a missional question which centers on the importance of contextualization of the Gospel in a cultural context. Answer to this question is made difficult by long history of colonialism by the Western European nations. How can the Gospel message of Christ be spread without an oppressive, exploitive spirit and without dubious motivations that are centered on other focuses than Christ?

For Newbigin, the Gospel takes on concrete form in the lives of people through the establishment of Christian community which immerses itself in God’s Holy Word in thought and action, celebrates the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, and lives out the connection in ministry with the apostles. Regarding the importance of Christian community, he writes, “It will be the life of a community which remembers, rehearses, and lives by the story which the Bible tells and of which the central focus is the story told in the New Testament. This remembering and rehearsing will be through the continual reading and reflection on the Bible and the continual repetition of the sacraments of

²¹Ibid., 151.

²²Ibid., 142.

baptism and the eucharist.”²³ In cross-cultural mission, the establishment of Christian community will be vital for effective and thriving missionary activity.

Other global cultures need to be valued by missionaries as people that God loves, and missionaries need to critically examine how they have been shaped by modern and/or postmodern culture as they enter in the mission field. Relationships can be damaged so easily, thus preventing any hearing of the gospel. Hearing of the Gospel by indigenous cultures can only happen when mutual friendships of love and peace are established between the missionary and the people.

Second, Frost and Hirsch remind us that “incarnational mission will mean that in reaching a people group we will need to *identify* with them in all ways possible without compromising the truth of the gospel itself.”²⁴ What this means is that it becomes too easy for missionaries to bring their culture into indigenous cultures.

Spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not require missionaries to subvert native cultures and impose cultural values of the United States, modern or postmodern. Missionaries need to identify with the people where they are and love them where they are. There will be values among native cultures that stand opposite to the values of God’s kingdom. This will need to be addressed by missionaries; however, if missionaries lose the ability to identify with native cultures, then there is no opportunity to communicate the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Third, “incarnational mission implies a *real and abiding* incarnational presence among a group of people.”²⁵ Missionaries must enjoy people, just like Jesus. Missionaries must enjoy their surroundings, even though some environments will be difficult. They

²³Ibid., 147.

²⁴Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 37.

²⁵Ibid., 39.

must hang out with the people. All missionaries need to embed themselves into the life of the community with a sense of godly joy and a strong desire to be where God has planted them. An incarnational presence demands this of all missionaries. There can be no real identification with the people unless a real and abiding presence is established as intimate relationships are being built and nurtured. In central and western Nebraska, for instance, there is farming and ranching. Missional pastors will only be effective if they genuinely and authentically enjoy the farming and ranching lifestyles and cultures.

The second critical nature of ministry is servanthood. Jesus, the Son, reveals the heart of the Father. In a conversation with Jesus, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, request a favor (see Mark 10:35- 35) which has to do with greatness in the kingdom. Jesus addresses their request: “But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant... For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43,45). Jesus essentially says to them that greatness will only come by serving others. The genetic code of all missionaries needs to be an understanding of service and servant.

The missionally effective servant leaders will lead by loving with caring, and compassionate spirit and will recognize that “every assignment is holy ground because Jesus gave Himself for the people who live there. Every place is important because God wants you to accomplish something supernatural there. Every situation is special because ministry is needed there.”²⁶ People, shaped by postmodern ethos and morality, are deeply loved by God and stand in desperate need the refreshing and reviving presence of God

²⁶H.B. London Jr. and Neil B. Wiseman, *The Heart of A Great Pastor: How to Grow Strong and Thrive Wherever God Has Planted You* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1994) , 20.

through experiencing communal love, care, and compassion. Unfortunately today, many churches, who are currently experiencing various rates of declension and decline, fail to do this. Loving others as Christ's representatives gets replaced by other problems and difficulties. It becomes difficult to minister and carry on God's mission amidst when hopeless, despair, and anxiety dominate the life of the church and its servant leader(s).

Because so many churches are struggling to survive, servant leaders will need to have "a holy dissatisfaction with things as they are."²⁷ As they are, many churches continue to face escalating survival issues because postmodern – as well as modern – culture has changed the religious and spiritual landscape of the United States and Canada. This is not surprising. The book of Judges shows a people constantly wandering away from God spiritually, morally, and ethically. One of the major problems faced by the Israelites was the disappearance of values; the other major problem was in inconsistency of moral leadership by the leaders.

Servant leaders will need to be men and women of moral and ethical integrity so that postmodern people will see personal and professional integrity. Integrity is a vital image of servant leaders if they are going to gain a hearing in this postmodern world. As London Jr. and Wiseman correctly state, "People on the outside of the church are suspicious and untrusting of the church and its leaders, looking for any flaw or failure in it or its leaders."²⁸ In a postmodern world in which ethical and moral behavior appears shapeless and non-Christian, the words of Paul to Timothy regarding the "elder" provide a clarion call to credibility among the servant leaders today. "For an elder must be a man

²⁷Ibid., 201.

²⁸London Jr. and Wiseman, *The Heart of A Great Pastor*, 235. In chapter 10 "Living Beyond Reproach" the authors share a detailed strategy in how servant leaders can avoid compromising situations. See also their book *Pastors at Risk* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993).

whose life cannot be spoken against. He must be faithful to his wife. He must exhibit self-control, live wisely, and have a good reputation. He must enjoy having guests in his home and must be able to teach. He must not be a heavy drinker or be violent. He must be gentle, peace loving, and not one who loves money” (1Tim. 3:2, 3). Integrity will be required of all missional leaders if a hearing of the gospel is to take place in the postmodern world.

The third – and final – critical nature of ministry is integrative ministry in the mission. The United Methodist Church has received a distinctive, theological heritage from the Wesley brothers, John and Charles. John, through the power of the Holy Spirit, became a great witness for God in eighteenth-century Britain and America during its colonial period. The United Methodist Church today received from him a dynamic but complex theological heritage. One distinctive emphasis was how faith and life interacted in an inexorable relationship. It mattered to Wesley that disciples’ faith would lead to “works of mercy.” In other words, personal faith with Christ as Savior must always lead to a relationship with Christ as Lord, who calls people and sends them out into the mission field. Consequently, followers of Christ must be involved in social ministry. Care for the poor, the dispossessed, and the weak must emerge from a personal faith in Christ, otherwise faith is lifeless. A disciple’s faith must be active in works of mercy and compassion.

Any separation of a personal decision for Christ and active engagement in social ministry causes the gospel to be reduced in two ways. First, the gospel gets reduced to a privatized decision in which faith becomes solely a matter of individual choice. Second, the gospel gets reduced to public action that does not require any existential decision of

personal piety. Tillich correctly points out that “The Christian Gospel is a matter of decision. It is to be accepted or rejected.”²⁹ Wesley never envisioned a Christian life in this manner. He envisioned life as an incarnation life that unites a personal decision regarding Christ and the work that Christ sends his disciples to do. Wesley’s words speak loudly: “Are you better instructed than to put asunder what God has joined? Than to separate works of piety from works of mercy? Are you uniformly zealous of both?”³⁰ The existential spiritual life of making a personal decision for Christ, praying, worshipping, reading the Bible, or fasting must lead to an active life of social ministry.

Leadership

Postmodern times or whatever this emerging culture is morphing into requires strong and effective leadership that understands the times, discerns the direction for God’s church as a missional community, and leads God’s people faithfully into the future with confidence in God. George Barna sees that the Church in America faces several crises: a crisis of faith, a crisis of spiritual depth, a crisis of innovation, and most of all, a crisis of leadership.³¹ This author agrees with Barna that a crisis of leadership is presently occurring in many mainline churches and denominational offices.

Leaders in the church, clergy and lay persons, simply do not know how to lead in this postmodern world. Specifically, current leaders in churches do not know how to transitional traditional congregations into missional communities who see themselves as

²⁹Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) , 201.

³⁰John Wesley, “On Zeal” in Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991) , 437.

³¹George Barna, “Nothing is More Important Than Leadership” in *Leaders on Leadership: Wisdom, Advice and Encouragement on the Art of Leading God’s People*, gen. ed. George Barna (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1997) , 29.

participating in the mission of Christ. From a clergy perspective, leadership by clergy in churches has centered on traditional pastoral roles: counselor, healer, manager, and teacher. From the worlds of psychology, medicine, business, and education, pastors have lead congregations while relying upon old paradigms of mission and ministry, which will not change the dying and low spiritual vitality of many churches or transition churches into missional communities.

Consequently, “leaders” of dying churches fail to communicate with postmodern people, and remain clueless because they fail to understand the times. Missional leader Bill Hybels recognizes the importance of leadership: “What flourishing churches have in common is that they are led by people who possess and deploy the spiritual gift of leadership.”³² Whatever biblical form the American Church takes in this postmodern world as the twenty-first century goes forward, effective leadership will be essential.

What is leadership? No consensual definition exists. Leadership means something different to each church leader. Some definitions focus on a broad understanding in terms of influencing people; others focus more narrowly in terms of the work to be done. One such definition is, “the exercise of one’s spiritual gifts under the call of God to serve a certain group of people in achieving the goals God has given them toward the end of glorifying Christ.”³³

No matter what definition one uses, the important issue is that postmodern times require new kinds of leadership with new kinds of leaders if churches and denominations are to communicate with postmodern people, thus avoiding dancing with the dinosaurs

³²Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) , 26.

³³Kenneth O. Gangel, “What Leaders Do” in *Leaders on Leadership: Wisdom, Advice and Encouragement on the Art of Leading God’s People*, gen. ed. George Barna (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1997) , 31.

and heading toward distinction. For Christian futurist Bill Easum, “Churches wanting to break free from the quagmire of their dysfunctional systems and climb out of their downward death spiral must learn to feel, think, and act differently than they do now.”³⁴ This will require effective leadership to address the challenges of the times. Specifically, this will require effective leadership that can transition dying churches into missional communities. In a missional context, leadership is “about cultivating an environment that innovates and releases the missional imagination present among a community of God’s people.”³⁵ Church Growth professor Eddie Gibbs sees missional leadership as “leaders who can read the Scriptures with fresh eyes, relating the story of redemption to the human condition in its present cultural contexts – contexts that are increasingly multicultural and influenced by global trends.”³⁶

The first primary task of missional leaders is to understand the times, as the men of Issachar did. “All these men understood the temper of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take” (1 Chron. 12:32). The sons of Issachar had a two-fold ministry: one, they needed to understand the culture of their times; and two, they had a specific course of action. Today, missional leaders need the spirit of the sons of Issachar in so that they can understand postmodern culture, which will then lead to the development and implementation of specific strategies of ministry. Understanding culture needs to be done with a conversational but discerning engagement. While missional leaders do not need to

³⁴Bill Easum, *Leadership on the Otherside: No Rules, Just Clues* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000) , 39.

³⁵Alan J. Roxburgh, and Fred Romanul, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach A Changing World*, with a foreword by Eddie Gibbs. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006) , 5.

³⁶Eddie Gibbs, *LeadershipNext: Changing Leaders in A Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005) , 24.

know everything about contemporary culture, they do need to be familiar with culture and postmodernism.

This author reads daily online the Life section in the *USAToday* newspaper which focuses on popular culture. Going to barnesandnoble.com to purchase and browse through what people are reading is helpful in understanding how people think and what is influencing them. Beliefnet.com is an excellent online site to engage culture in terms of spirituality (i.e., spiritual beliefs). Relevantmagazine.com is another site to begin to understand culture. Washington State University offers online a catalogue of general popular culture resources (music, film, television, sports, fashion, advertising, and cyberculture) and specific popular culture resources (race, class, gender, sexuality, censorship, imperialism).³⁷

Many internet sites give people access to massive amounts of information about contemporary culture. A quick Google search reveals the number of hits to the following: Film (1,570,000,000), television (947,000,000), fashion (530,000,000), sports (2,910,000,000), advertising (2,000,000,000), celebrities (110,000,000), art (2,640,000), sexuality (87,300,000), sex (737,000,000), spirituality (96,600,000), postmodernism (8,170,000), postmodern culture (10,900,000), world religion (348,000,000), god (582,000,000), and death (836,000,000).³⁸ Also, magazines such as *People*, *US*, and *In Touch Weekly* provide weekly information on culture as does a variety of television shows like *Oprah*, *Maury*, *E!* Entertainment Television, *MTV* and *VH1*. Supermarket

³⁷Washington State University, "Popular Culture: Resources for Critical Analysis," (Pullman, WA: Washington State University, 2002), <http://www.wsu.edu/%7Eamerstu/pop/tvrguide.html>. (accessed June 9, 2006).

³⁸The Google search was conducted by this author on June 9, 2006. Please note that the Google search was descriptive in nature, only revealing the number of hits. This search does not reveal how many of these hits are in existence. The cumulative number of hits does reveal a massive amount of information in which to keep informed about contemporary culture.

tabloids – National Enquirer and Star Magazine – are a source of cultural information as well.

From a Christian leadership perspective, this cumulative impact of postmodern culture clearly points to a changed world in which “the church is no longer one of the central institutions that shapes values and meets the social, emotional and spiritual needs of the Western world. It has ceased to provide the primary reference point of identity for people. In this post-Constantinian era, the church’s role has become much more modest and marginal...”³⁹ This is a vital understanding of the times for church leaders.

This does not mean the current situation is hopeless, but it means that the times are significantly different. As a result, leadership in churches need to understand that the time has come for new leadership to emerge, specifically missional leadership. The times require leaders to transition churches into missional churches. The people in the church need to see that North America is now a mission field which begins right outside the doors of the church. The “come-to-us” foundation to ministry must die in order for dying and struggling churches to grow into thriving and effective missional churches. Churches can no longer simply open the doors and meet the people as they come to the church. People in postmodern culture, who are shaped by other cultural influences, are not being reached by many churches today. It is time for new forms of ministry, which will require new forms of leadership. Consequently, “church leaders in the twenty-first century must be prepared to reexamine all of their established assumptions, policies, and procedures. They must initiate change by asking those they serve whether the church and its leadership are obstacles or channels to becoming a more effective missional presence in

³⁹Gibbs, *LeadershipNext*, 47.

their specific cultural context.”⁴⁰ It is time for a sense of urgency – another key to understanding the times.

The second task is to transition establish churches, which may or may not be struggling or even dying, into thriving missional communities which will require a reconnection of ecclesiology with missiology.⁴¹ Without pressing the dichotomy of church and mission too strongly, a separation has occurred in understanding the relationship between church and God’s mission. In dying churches, what has been forgotten by church leaders and members is that the church exists for God’s mission. The church is missionary by nature.

The ministry of the church proceeds from its nature, which is missional. Regrettably, mission has been understood as “missions,” which are “the structures and activities that grew up during the modern missions movement. These structures carry out a critical aspect of the ministry of the church and are woven into its organizational life.”⁴² In other words, God’s mission has come to be identified with missions which are carried out by the “professional” or paid staff. For a church to transition into a missional church, church leaders must see the essence (identity) of church as missional in identity in the sense of reflecting God’s nature – God’s missional nature. The being of church is missional since God’s being is missional. Mission is more than ministry of the church; it is the nature of the church itself. It is the shape of God’s heart coming alive in the congregation through the participative commitment of the church.

⁴⁰Ibid., 37.

⁴¹Ibid., 38.

⁴²Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, with a foreword by Richard J. Mouw (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000) , 30.

Rather than focusing on what leaders do or how leaders, either clergy or laity, function, or focus on the duties of leaders, or focus on the nature of leadership, what is more important is this focusing question: “What is required today of leaders who are called to the task of leading God’s people in the midst of postmodern times?” This is a critical question to answer because contemporary culture continues to bombard the Church in America and its leaders with difficult moral and ethical issues in which leaders have not experienced before. For those leaders and congregations that desire to seize tomorrow and be effective in their witness or for those churches that desire to stop dancing with the dinosaurs, this leadership question needs a firm and committed response.

What is required of leaders? Leaders, first of all, need to keep focused on Jesus, who is our “morning star” (Rev. 22:16). When Peter lost sight of Jesus as he attempted to walk on water, he began to sink (Matt. 14:30-31). The same happens to all of God’s leaders when their focus changes from Jesus to the problems of the Church. While leaders need to identify and address the significant issues that face the church, it is more important to focus on Christ. Christian futurist Leonard Sweet correctly points out that “Postmodern leaders are not customer-centric but Christo-centric. Their focus is not “what the customer wants,” but “what Christ wants.” They look to Christ themselves to help others find Christ in their own lives, to help the word made flesh be made fresh again.”⁴³ Jesus is the world’s greatest lover. He loves postmodern people. He loves

⁴³Leonard Sweet, *Aquachurch* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, Inc., 1999) , 39. This book presents eleven leadership arts that he sees as essential for leaders to navigate the flood waters of postmodern culture. While all these are important, this author will focus on just four: Jesus the Christ, the Bible, risk taking, and courage. The focus on these four will be required in transitioning leaders and churches into missional leaders and churches. This author refers to his book for full details for the other leadership arts.

modern people. He loves the Church. He loves the leaders of the Church. He loves all creation. In the midst of postmodern culture, what does Jesus call us to do? What does Jesus want us to do? LOVE! How is the Church in America going to love people who are being shaped by postmodern ethics and morals? Potential answers to those questions may be hard for the Church in America because it requires a reassessment of how God's people are going to relate to postmodern culture.

A second leadership art is being genuinely led by the Bible. Sweet states, "God has given spiritual navigators a compass: The Scriptures. The Scriptures point us to Christ. They enable us to locate the North Star."⁴⁴ Leaders will need to constantly be guided by this spiritual compass so that the Church in America, including the leaders themselves, will not get lost in this endless, morphing postmodern culture that has cynical and nihilistic features. In Revelation 10:8-11, the angel tells John to eat the scroll (i.e., God's Word). Whereas John experienced a physical eating, we as followers of Christ are to spiritually eat every word of God that comes through the Bible. Leaders will need to discern how God is speaking and directing our lives today, and then communicate that word in a manner that connects with postmodern people who need to be shown that the Bible is God's GPS (Global Positioning System) for our lives.

A third leadership art is risk taking. God needs more leaders and churches who are willing to take risks. Both leaders and churches must be willing to fail; otherwise, the "unholy predicament that the church finds itself in today – fear-ridden, safety-fixated, immunity-seeking, risk-averse in a high-risk postmodern culture"⁴⁵ will continue and churches will continue to struggle and eventually die, as the seven churches in Revelation

⁴⁴Ibid., 54.

⁴⁵Ibid., 94.

did. Jesus certainly experienced risk during His earthly ministry. He talked to a Samaritan woman. He ate with sinners. He touched physically ill people. He trusted His disciples. Jesus is calling leaders to “get off the boat” of status quo church and get out into the world of postmodern culture. Jesus wants God’s people to seek people. Leaders need to remember that Jesus is calling and sending out his followers into the world on a mission.

A fourth leadership art is courage.⁴⁶ It will take courage to enter the postmodern world which poses many challenges. If leaders keep their eyes upon Jesus and be firmly guided by God’s Holy Spirit, then a world of possibilities awaits those who get out of the boat of institutional church. It is hard to see beyond fear, especially for church people and leaders who are presently in dying churches. This is what fear does to all leaders and churches, which always need to remember Jesus as their morning star and the Bible as their guiding compass. “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline” (2 Tim.1:7). Fear prevents leaders from leading and churches from carrying out their mission courageously. Courageous leadership is the leadership art that God needs desperately, and has required from past biblical leaders: Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah etc.

Courageous leaders will need to address many fears that exist in dying churches, especially as they face the missional setting of postmodern culture. Tim Conder, pastor of Emmaus Way,⁴⁷ identifies seven fears that “can prevent theological dialogue, impede the church’s ability to consider the issues of emerging culture transition, and even mitigate the potential blessings the church can receive from questions raised in the emerging

⁴⁶This leadership art is essential for Bill Hybels as well. In his book *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), he writes about the need for such leadership in the church today.

⁴⁷For further information see Emmaus Way, “Mission at Emmaus Way,” (Chapel Hill, NC: Emmaus Way, 2005), http://www.emmaus-way.com/content/2005/06/mission_at_emma.html. (accessed May 25, 2006).

culture.”⁴⁸ In Conder’s view, these fears will impede the church’s ability to critically engage people who are influenced and shaped by the ethos of postmodernism. These fears ultimately have to do with the church’s interaction or relationship with an emerging contemporary culture.

These fears are important to recognize because they can lead to phobic fear, which, as Christian authors Mac Brunson and Ergun Caner, emphasize: “regardless of your personal opinion about the psychobabble that seems to permeate Christian culture these days, most of us would agree that phobias are very real. They can freeze a person and his participation in any number of activities.”⁴⁹ What Brunson and Caner say about individuals applies to congregations. Fear can permeated the life of the church and immobilize it and prevent participation in God’s mission. These seven fears center on truth, faith, accommodation, the Word of God, ethics and morality, and traditions and heritage.

Fear one to overcome is the loss of truth in an objective and absolute sense in postmodern thought which “leaves no room for the truth of the gospel.”⁵⁰ Conder rightly identifies a concern that evaluative judgments toward postmodern view of truth have been too broad and misleading. Too many evaluations (i.e., all truth is relative) towards postmodernism tend towards sweeping generalizations. While this author shares his concern, there needs to be an evaluative awareness that there can be an openness toward

⁴⁸Tim Conder, *The Church in Transition: The Journey of Existing Churches into the Emerging Culture*, with a foreword by Dan Alexander (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006) , 40.

⁴⁹Mac Brunson and Ergun Caner, *Why Churches Die: Diagnosing Lethal Positions in the Body of Christ* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005) , 2005.

⁵⁰Conder, *The Church in Transition*, 41.

truth decay in postmodernism as truth becomes localized or privatized into a particular community.

Communication with postmodernists does need to happen through a discerning engagement with culture. Certainly, any church does not need to be paralyzed with fear towards postmodernism. The courageous leader will see that postmodern view of truth presents an opportunity for discussing what Jesus has to say about truth. This engaging conversation cannot take place if congregational leaders are fearful of the cultural environment in which a plurality of truths exists simultaneously. The courageous leader compassionately but intrepidly communicates the truth of Jesus Christ, as correctly recognized by Newbigin:

Human beings only exist as members of communities which share a common language, customs, ways of ordering economic and social life, ways of understanding and coping with their world. If the gospel is to be understood, if it is to be received as something which communicates truth about the real human situation, if it is, as we say, to 'make sense,' it has to be communicated in the language of those to whom it is addressed and has to be clothed in symbols which are meaningful to them.⁵¹

Fear two to conquer is the loss of existential faith. Conder correctly recognizes that a strong invasive spirit of individualism has permeated America life from the beginning of its history. Commenting on American individualism, sociologist Robert Bellah writes, "Individualism lies at the very core of American culture... We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it's sacrilegious."⁵² For some faith communities, the focus on community is a fearful one. Conversely, postmodern thought focuses

⁵¹Newbigin, *The Gospel in A Pluralistic Society*, 141.

⁵²Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, with updated ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996) , 142.

positively on the reintroduction of a community spirit among people. This communal emphasis is a strong rebuttal to American individualism, and a necessary correction in the life of the church which, from this author's point of view, has accommodated too much of American culture in its life. From a biblical view, "biblical individualism comes in the context of community. The narrative of the Scriptures describes God's work of redemption coming through communities of worshippers."⁵³ There is no need to fear the loss of individualism; it is just that American churches stand in need of reclaiming the communal spirit. Community enhances and matures individual faith. The courageous leader promotes an integrative spirituality, which merges the personal and the communal.

Fear three to defeat is the fear to do "culturally relevant ministry"⁵⁴ at the expense of "dumbing down"⁵⁵ the gospel. Conder rightly identifies that accommodation to culture can occur inside the church. As an example of "dumbing down," he cites the infiltration of business language, methods, and organizational models into the life of the church. Too much business philosophy and decision-making processes has penetrated ministry decisions. Consequently, the real presence of accommodation has turned churches from kingdom and mission-oriented communities to church "businesses." He recognizes this has happened as churches have turned to the ideology of business. He further recognizes that the gospel and ministry has been reduced in other manners as well. "It becomes a 'gospel of my lifestyle' (an affirmation of personal choices), 'a gospel of my people' (an affirmation of national or local interests), 'a gospel of my

⁵³Conder, *The Church in Transition*, 49.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁵The concept of "dumbing down" came from this author's reading of Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995). Her concern is that congregations are accommodating culture by "dumbing down" worship to reach them. While Dawn writes in the context of worship, this idea of "dumbing down" can extend to every area of church ministry.

dreams’ (an affirmation of our own aspirations and future plans), or ‘a gospel of my pain’ (an affirmation of God’s ability to heal our personal issues and pain).”⁵⁶

There is no good reason to fear accommodation, as reminded by Paul: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline (2 Tim. 1:7). Rather than being motivated by fear, church leadership needs to operate out of power and love. This does not mean that church leaders should not be watchful and continue to prayerfully discern ministry decisions. A great temptation does exist to make ministry relevant, whether its worship, evangelism, or discipleship. Leaders do need to be clear on their understanding of relevant. This author uses the word “relevant” in a specialized and focused meaning, centering on communication. Relevant ministry is ministry that seeks to communicate with people in postmodern culture. It is the kind of ministry that desires discerning engagement with postmodernists through spiritual conversations as the Gospel is communicated in a manner that will connect. The courageous leader recognizes that the church needs to communicate differently if the message of Gospel is to be heard by an eclectic, postmodern audience.

Fear four to triumph over is “the devaluation of the Bible.”⁵⁷ Conder fittingly acknowledges that the Bible has become devalued through doctrinal and ethical propositionalism, moralism, and chaplaincy. Each of these devaluations “dumb down” the Bible. With propositionalism, the Bible gets reduced to “a set of simple principles that can be easily communicated, understood, and acted upon.”⁵⁸ While there are some sections of the Bible that are propositional, the Bible needs to be read in a holistic

⁵⁶Conder, *The Church in Transition*, 56.

⁵⁷Ibid., 60.

⁵⁸Ibid., 62.

approach which encounters the complex ethical and moral stories, the expressive poetry, the metaphorical drama, the social and cultural commentary by the prophets, the mystery of the apocalyptic writers, the documentary-like style of the Gospels, and the real humanity of people in the epistles.

With moralism, the Bible gets reduced to simple moral teachings; however, “much of the Bible is the scandalous story of humans asserting their own agendas or trying to accomplish God’s agenda apart from God.”⁵⁹ Like propositionalism, the Bible gets reduced to a single manner of reading and interpreting. The Bible is more complex than a single reading or interpretation. With pastoral chaplaincy in dying churches, the Bible “becomes an ‘amen’ to selfish politics, consumerism, individualism, the American way, and many other cultural agendas”⁶⁰ thus reducing the transformative power of God’s Word. In effect, the Word of God becomes silences in people lives when the Bible becomes captive to chaplaincy in which individual needs are simply met. The Bible becomes a commodity to receive religious or spiritual goods and services. It no longer becomes an encounter between the living God and His creatures. The courageous leader acknowledges the danger of propositionalism, moralism, and chaplaincy and addresses those reductionistic approaches to Scripture through the teaching and preaching ministry.

Fear five to prevail over is the fear of “abandoning Christian ethics and accepting immoral behavior.”⁶¹ Conder appropriately points out that while Christian churches, especially socially and theologically conservative ones, complain about the rising immorality in culture, the indignation never refers to the church itself. The image of the

⁵⁹Ibid., 63.

⁶⁰Ibid., 64.

⁶¹Ibid., 69.

North American church becomes one of anger and indifference toward social issues. This author agrees with Conder who believes that “the Christian community needs to acknowledge that there is some truth to the emerging culture’s criticism of us”⁶² and who also believes that the cultural image of church as inactive is a wrong image of the Church because there is a long history of social activism by Roman Catholics and Protestants, mainline and evangelical. Capturing this spirit of social activism, the evangelical document Manila Manifesto states:

The authentic gospel must become visible in the transformed lives of men and women. As we proclaim the love of God we must be involved in loving service, as we preach the Kingdom of God we must be committed to its demands of justice and peace.

Evangelism is primary because our chief concern is with the gospel, that all people may have the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Yet Jesus not only proclaimed the Kingdom of God, he also demonstrated its arrival by works of mercy and power. We are called today to a similar integration of words and deeds. In a spirit of humility we are to preach and teach, minister to the sick, feed the hungry, care for prisoners, help the disadvantaged and handicapped, and deliver the oppressed. While we acknowledge the diversity of spiritual gifts, callings and contexts, we also affirm that good news and good works are inseparable.⁶³

The social ethic as summarized in this statement of faith represents the social ethic of John Wesley who did not see good news and good works as separate but interrelated.

Through Wesley’s writings, he attempted to mold the character of Methodists. In answering the question, “What is a Methodist?” Wesley answers, “he does good unto all men – unto neighbors, and strangers, friends, and enemies. And that in every possible kind; not only to their bodies, by ‘feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those

⁶²Ibid., 71-72.

⁶³Lausanne II: Second International Congress on World Evangelism, “Manila Manifesto: The Gospel and Social Responsibility,” (Manilla, Philippines: LausanneII: the Second International Congress on World Evangelism, 1989), <http://www.lausanne.org/Brix?pageID=12894>. (accessed on July 9, 2006). The document also elaborates: “We repent that the narrowness of our concerns and vision has often kept us from proclaiming the lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life, private and public, local and global. We determine to obey his command to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” Evangelicals recognize the necessity of repentance when action is not taken and thus take responsibility.

that are sick or in prison', but much more does he labour to do good to their souls, as of the ability which God giveth."⁶⁴ Describing the shape of an active faith, Wesley writes, "Now that a faith which brings not forth good works is not a living faith, but a dead and devilish one."⁶⁵ Finally, Wesley expected faith and works (i.e., fruit). From Methodists, he expected evidence: (1) "By doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind" ; (2) "By doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power, as they have opportunity doing good of every possible sort and as far as is possible to all men" ; and (3) "By attending upon all the ordinances of God."⁶⁶

Following Wesley's death in 1791, Methodists in England and then in America continued to be involved in social issues. "The United Methodist Church has a long history of concern for social justice. Its members have often taken forthright positions on controversial issues involving Christian principles. Early Methodists expressed their opposition to the slave trade, to smuggling, and to the cruel treatment of prisoners."⁶⁷ In 1905 a social creed was adopted. 2004's version of the social creed called "The Social Principles" reflects a broad commitment to social activism in sundry areas: water, energy resources, animal life, space, science and technology, food, the family, sexuality, dying persons, race, persons with disabilities etc. Evangelicals in the Methodist family group or denomination reflect other evangelical family groups. The history of the American

⁶⁴John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist" in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 9: The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design. Bicentennial ed., ed. Rupert E. Davies. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989) , 41.

⁶⁵John Wesley, "The Principles of A Methodist" in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 9: The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design. Bicentennial ed., ed. Rupert E. Davies. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989) , 52.

⁶⁶John Wesley, "General Rules of the United Societies" in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 9: The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design. Bicentennial ed., ed. Rupert E. Davies. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989) , 70 – 73.

⁶⁷*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church: 2004* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004) , 95.

Church reveals commitments to social issues by evangelicals. However, when the social witness falters, courageous leaders need to hear the criticisms arising from postmodern culture in order to learn and grow and be able to communicate with postmodernists.

Fear six to surmount is the fear of the “loss of the traditions and practices.”⁶⁸ Conder properly understands that “ministry in the emerging culture is not simply about abandoning our traditions. It’s about finding our history and connecting this legacy to our current and future mission.”⁶⁹ Dying churches have lost a sense of history in the sense of their ecclesial identity. These churches will need to begin a journey to rediscover and reconnect with past traditions. In the process of this journey, all church traditions will need to be evaluated from a missional perspective. Missional questions will need to be asked. For instance, are the present traditions able to communicate with people in the postmodern culture? Courageous leaders will ask the tough questions for the mission of God, and not fear asking them.

Courageous leaders are willing to get out of the boat and also “unlearn.” Unlearning will be required of missional leaders. “Unlearning is about going in a different direction. Unlearning means repentance. It requires us to identify ways we were wrong and to rebuild in a new direction.”⁷⁰ Church leaders have to unlearn current practices of worship, evangelism, ministry, discipleship, and fellowship because what effectively worked in the past will not work in postmodern times. Unlearning leaders understand the times in which they live. Church leaders have to unlearn to thrive and be effective in postmodern times. Denominations will also need to unlearn. There is no

⁶⁸Conder, *The Church in Transition*, 79.

⁶⁹Ibid., 82.

⁷⁰Michael Slaughter, *Unlearning Church: Just When You Thought You Had Leadership All Figured Out*, with collaboration by Warren Bird, with a foreword by Leonard Sweet (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2001), 18.

aspect in contemporary church life that does not need to unlearn. A radical reorientation to Jesus needs to happen among God's People. Unlearning points to the faith that takes great risks for Christ because God's mission is great. Unlearning requires people to get out the boat of maintenance ministry. Unlearning is a lifestyle, a commitment to live under the radical Lordship of Christ in postmodern times.

Creativity and imagination⁷¹ will be needed from courageous leaders. With the exception of the churches that are reaching out to the postmodern generation effectively, there is a dearth of imagination in many dying and struggling churches. Church life becomes embedded in dysfunction. All the biblical foundations to church life gets reduced to the passionless pursuit of simply surviving.

Many leaders as well as congregations are trying hard to survive by maintaining the status quo. This makes it extremely hard for imaginative and creative individuals to remain in those churches. These individuals are not given permission to try new ministries that are imaginative and creative. Frost and Hirsch affirm this need: "There seems to be painfully little permission either from denominational, local, or personal leadership, to 'go for it' and try new things."⁷² Missional leadership will require such creativity and imagination as every area of church life will need to be reimaged in the context of a postmodern world, which enjoys the creative spirit. This current lack of creativity and imagination among dying congregations is terribly ironic in the context that God is revealed to be an imaginative Creator, and Jesus the Son affirms that revelation through his life, death, and resurrection.

⁷¹This author duly gives credit to Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch in their book *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) as the original source for this writer's reflection. In chapter 11, they discuss this need for imaginative leadership in God's global Church.

⁷²Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 183.

Questioning leadership is desperately needed from courageous leaders.

Questioning as an integral leadership trait is necessary for the transition from struggle and dying to missional identity and participation. Questions do not necessarily emerge from doubt, doubt that arises from uncertainty and distrust. Questions emerge from desire, desire to see churches thrive in postmodern culture and they understand themselves as participating with God in the mission. Effective, thriving communicators “understand that well-formed questions can be wielded as a battle horn, soft and low at first, then growing as they echo from mind to heart and back again, serving as a clarion invitation to new possibilities and previously unconsidered truths.”⁷³ Therefore, questions do serve a vital purpose in a missional leader’s thinking. To lead effectively, questions must be asked questions because the missional leader understands the transforming power of questions, questions which pressure traditionalism, the status quo, and comfort. Questions launch leaders and congregations into self-examination.

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, he was short on self-help advice but long on spiritually discerning and penetrating questions. In the eighth chapter of Mark, we read the following scenes: a miraculous feeding (1-10), the demand for a miraculous sign (11-13), a warning against wrong teaching (14-21), a miraculous healing (22-26), Peter’s confession (27-30), and the prediction of Christ’s death (31-37). All six scenes are thematically united through Jesus’ questions:

- “How many loaves of bread do you have?” (8:5)
- “Why do you people keep demanding a miraculous sign?” (8:12)
- “Why are you so worried about having no food?” (8:17)

⁷³Jedd Medefind and Erik Lokkesmoe, *The Revolutionary Communicator: Seven Principles Jesus Lived to Impact, Connect and Lead* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2004) , 49.

- “Won't you ever learn or understand?” (8:17)
- “Are your hearts too hard to take it in?” (8:17)
- “You have eyes – can't you see?” (8:18)
- “You have ears – can't you hear?” (8:18)
- “Don't you remember anything at all?” (8:18)
- “What about the five thousand men I fed with five loaves of bread?” (8:19)
- “How many baskets of leftovers did you pick up afterward?” (8:19)
- “How many large baskets of leftovers did you pick up?” (8:19)
- “Don't you understand even yet?” (8:21)
- “Can you see anything now?” (8:23)
- “Who do people say I am?” (8:27)
- “Who do you say I am?” (8:29)
- “And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the process?” (8:36)
- “Is anything worth more than your soul?” (8:37)

These questions are more than leading questions or mere conversational questions. Jesus' questions pierce the heart, mind, and soul. They test, rebuke, explore, and invite deeper self-examination. Through these spiritually-examining questions, Jesus is seeking for honesty, truth, and discovery.

The questions from Mark 8 and all of Jesus' questions throughout the Gospels have distinctive characteristics. First, Jesus' questions were “sincere.”⁷⁴ They addressed real spiritual issues that mattered to Jesus, who was deeply interested in the response by the questioned. Second, the questions “were attuned to the uniqueness of each

⁷⁴Ibid., 60.

situation.”⁷⁵ For instance, the question to the disciples about his identity (8:27) emerged naturally during a conversation as they were walking from Galilee to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Third, the questions asked by Jesus “fit to the audience.”⁷⁶ When Jesus asked, the questions were relevant to the people. To the blind person, Jesus asked, “Can you see now?” This question was direct and to the point with the purpose to elicit a response. Fourth, Jesus’ questions were “decisively clarifying.”⁷⁷ What Jesus asked got to the real issue in people’s lives. The question – “And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the process?” – is a question of introspective examination that requires an ultimate decision. With Jesus, there always had to be a final answer – no neutrality. Finally, Jesus’ questions “provided a space for the audience to decide.”⁷⁸ No manipulation. No pressure. No coercing. No forced decisions. Jesus allowed room for free will. Jesus’ hearers would have to decide for themselves.

Both framing questions of this project – “Will many of our congregations, like the dinosaurs, become extinct?” and “Is your church ready to seize tomorrow?” – hope to be sincere in the sense that they address the real issues and unique challenges the congregation in Valentine faces. These two questions are helping this faith community wrestle with the critical issues that face the church. In the context of recent history, the two framing questions will hopefully encourage church members to clarify the deeper issues that have negatively affected the life of the church. Despite the critical importance of the two questions, the congregation must face the answer alone. They have to answer the questions themselves. It is the church’s decision.

⁷⁵Ibid., 60.

⁷⁶Ibid., 61.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid., 62.

Leadership in the church is the midst of transition. Amidst these changing times, new spiritual leadership is needed for these postmodern times. Old leadership styles will not be effective because the future is changing so fast and is unpredictable. Consequently, “Church leaders in the twenty-first century must be prepared to reexamine all of their established assumptions, policies and procedures.”⁷⁹ This reexamination of ministry foundations will be required for all pastors and lay persons if any congregation is to transition into a missional church with leaders committed to God’s mission. Missional questions – questions from the standpoint of God’s mission – will need to examine current practices of worship, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, ministry, and historical connection (in the sense of relationship with the denomination). Is the church producing leaders who are spiritual?

Spiritual leadership looks differently than leadership from other areas of life because of spiritual qualities. J. Oswald Sanders provides a helpful distinction between the qualities of what he calls “natural” leadership and spiritual leadership.⁸⁰ Whereas natural leaders are self-confident, spiritual leaders are confident in God the Father and God the Son. Whereas natural leaders have an intimate knowledge of human beings, spiritual leaders have human knowledge along with an intimate knowledge of God. Whereas natural leaders make their own decisions, spiritual leaders seek God’s will for themselves and the congregations in all decisions. Whereas natural leaders operate out of driving ambition, spiritual leaders humble themselves before God Almighty and keep focused on God’s mission. Whereas natural leaders follow human principles and business methods, spiritual leaders are foremost shaped by God’s example, as supremely

⁷⁹Gibbs, *LeadershipNext* , 37.

⁸⁰J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994) , 29.

manifested in Christ. Whereas natural leaders enjoy the earthly rewards such as command, spiritual leaders delight in obeying God's call on their lives. Whereas natural leaders seek personal rewards, spiritual leaders love God and others. Whereas natural leaders operate out of a spirit of independence, spiritual leaders function from a spirit of dependence on God.

It is through these spiritual qualities of leadership in which missional leaders think and function. Jesus instills a God-centered and grace-enabled confidence, so Christ is the primary motivator and sustainer of effective, thriving ministry. The love of Jesus Christ naturally flows from their leading, which people sense, and a transparent humbleness guides motivation and gives a sense of purpose. Because of the strong foundation of Christ, missional leaders courageously take risks and try innovative ministry, while keeping focused on the mission of God. Throughout ministry, the spiritual aspects of leadership strengths and encourages missional leaders.

Church

The dying Church in America in its institutional and denominational form faces numerous problems: loss of numbers, power, and social influence. The church culture is over in North America, just as it is over in the United Kingdom and Western Europe. No longer does the Christian community shape the values or social morals of postmodern society, including federal and state government. These are not the biggest problems the American Church faces, however. The most significant problem that churches face today is a theological problem of identity.

In agreement with Missional professor Darrell Guder, "The church's crisis is one of fundamental vocation, of calling to God's mission, of being, doing, and saying witness

in faithfulness to Jesus Christ, the Lord”⁸¹ The theological task will be for the American church to recover its biblical and missional identity, not “reinvent” itself into something new in order to be relatable to people in culture. In other words, dying and struggling churches need to reclaim their missional identity. Missiologist David Bosch writes, “Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God...Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world...God is a missionary God...a movement from God to the world...There is church because there is mission, not vice versa.”⁸²

This is a giant task of biblical proportions, yet a necessary one if churches are to communicate with people in the postmodern world and fulfill the mission of Christ. Churches and pastoral leaders will not find this to be an easy task. Some may feel it is a path not to go down, but the alternative and ultimate end is Revelation 2 and 3 which illustrate “Dead Churches Walking” who no longer exist except their remains. All that is left are fossil remains. This hard reality is tough, for we as Christ’s followers discover that not only does Christ establish churches but he closes them down as well. It can easily be imagined that at some point each of the churches failed to be a faithful church and not communicate with the people in ancient culture. To the churches at Pergamos, Sardis, and Laodicea, Jesus tells them to repent. What kind of repentance needs to take place today by dying churches and status quo leaders?

“What is a missional church? A missional church is “a church that is shaped by participating in God’s mission, which is to set things right in a broken and sinful world,

⁸¹Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series, gen. ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000) , 201.

⁸²David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) , 390.

to redeem it, and to restore it to what God has always intended for the world.”⁸³ The heart of a genetic code of a missional church is the biblical understanding that God’s people are being sent out into the (postmodern) world to fulfill their calling. The missional challenge for churches today is to help them see themselves vocationally on a mission and sent out to the mission field, which is just outside the doors of the church and not far away in a distant country. This mission field is full of postmodern people.

In understanding the church through a missional ecclesiology, a word needs to be said about denominations and denominationalism (the developmental process of how denominations arose and became established in North America).⁸⁴ Denominations presently serve as the primary form of the Church in North America; however, this has been and continues to change as this postmodern culture emerges. The origin of denominations resides in the pluralistic development of faith communities during the colonial period. “Denominations may have legitimacy, but they must be evaluated critically in order to assess the extent to which they represent all that God intends the church to be.”⁸⁵ The crucial assessment is “all that God intends the church to be.” If denominational churches are effectively communicating with postmodern (and modern) people, then they are living out their missional vocation and being all that God intends them to be. Currently, many church leaders, academic scholars, theologians, pastors, and church members express concern about the current state of the church in North America

⁸³Lois Y. Barrett, ed. *Treasures in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004) , x.

⁸⁴For further reading on the social, historical, and religious development of denominations, see Russell E. Richey, “Denominations and Denominationalism: An American Morphology,” in *Reimagining Denominationalism*, eds., Robert B. Mullin and Russell E. Richey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁸⁵Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series, gen. ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998) , 69.

and Western Europe. King's College (London) professor Pete Ward observes that many denominational and independent churches have become "solid" in their being and practice of mission and ministry, thus resulting in three mutations: church as heritage, church as refuge, and church as nostalgic community.⁸⁶

The church as heritage simply sees itself as existing to preserve past traditions even if traditions are not biblically and theologically grounded. The church's identity centers on historical preservation "Let's keep the heritage going" is the motto and primary purpose. Reaction to postmodern culture as well as modernity is one of battling against it. The church as refuge simply sees itself as a place where people of similar values, experiences, and desires gather together. This mutation of church quickly becomes restrictive in who belongs and attends. This church reacts emotionally to cultural change through denial. The church as nostalgic community focuses on the "imagined past."⁸⁷ There is a deep yearning for the "good old days" in which the church existed in a privileged status, had political power, and influenced the ethics and moral of American culture. This church retreats into its history and chooses not to notice how American culture has radically changed.

For denominational and independent churches to transform themselves from dying to living and powerful witnesses for Christ, a reorientation of core identity must happen if churches are to be effective witnesses in postmodern culture. For those churches that have become heritages, refuges, or nostalgic communities, this reorientation will be hard since it will require spiritual examinations and difficult questions to be asked and answered. Whether this happens in churches will be determined

⁸⁶Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002) , 26.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 28.

by pastoral leadership, denominational support, and most importantly the humble willingness to do this difficult but necessary task by congregations.

This author believes that the institutional church in North America needs an infusion of missional spirit to help dying churches regain their sense of missional identity. Too many churches have reduced their identity and sense of purpose to mere survival so that the next generation of persons will perpetuate the heritage. Hopes hang on to the latest program of revitalization from denominational offices. What is not understood is that their identity has been lost through the years as ministry has become less effective. A strong identity with a clear purpose is absent in these circumstances.

Churches must see themselves as a missional church, a church that is being sent out by God into the postmodern world so that people can encounter Christ. The vocation of a missional church centers on the call to be sent out by Christ into the world. Three priorities need to happen for the recovery of this missionary spirit (i.e., identity).

First, “churches must revive what it means to be communities of the reign of God.”⁸⁸ In the individualistic, autonomous, and choice-driven world of modernity and now postmodernity, many churches have embedded those values into its functional presence. These churches function as lone rangers, which is ironic because God has called his people to be communities of fellowship who participate together in the reign of God. In other words, the people of God are to be united communities through Christ and are to be a people on a mission together, not a people who dispense religious goods and services to consumers. A spirit of competition describes the relational nature of church between the churches in a local or regional area.

⁸⁸Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 108.

Second, “churches must discover what it means to act faithfully on behalf of the reign of God within the public life of the society.”⁸⁹ During the age of church culture in which the Christian faith was given privilege status and unquestioned influence, churches domineeringly imposed Christian values upon people. As the national and global culture has become postmodern in ethics and morality, no longer is it acceptable to force people, businesses, or the federal government to adopt the Christian view of reality and life through a spirit of domination and conquering.

Writing about the connection between religion and politics, founder of the Institute for Religion and Public Life Richard John Neuhaus describes the current relationship between religion and politics as the “naked public square.” He writes, “The naked public square...would exclude religion and religiously grounded values from the conduct of public business.”⁹⁰ Christian communities must model a different spirit if churches are to gain a hearing among postmodern people.

Third, “churches must learn to speak in post-Christendom accents as confident yet humble messengers of the reign of God.”⁹¹ In a pluralistic world in which many belief systems exist on an equal and valid basis, no one perspective is given privileged status. Churches must learn how to communicate with postmodern people in a manner that does not seem like a recruitment speech to join an organization. With a humble, obedient and respectful spirit, churches need to engage people where they are. This communication always needs to be honest, genuine, and gentle. “But you must do this in a gentle and

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984) , ix. This book offers Neuhaus’ analysis and assessment of religion’s role in the public life of America. For him, the question is not whether religion should play a role in America’s public life (it does!); the question is whether or not the interaction among politics and religion can lead to constructive and positive engagement.

⁹¹Ibid., 109.

respectful way” (1 Pet. 3:16). Helpful and relevant words from Peter as Christians enter into conversation with people who need a word of hope and encouragement amidst existential despair and anxiety in postmodern life.

Transitioning from a dead or dying congregation means moving beyond mere maintenance or survival; it means focusing on God’s mission, *mission dei*. A missional church understands that God’s mission originates from creation itself. In creation, God our Creator made human beings in God’s image. “Then God said, “Let us make people in our image, to be like ourselves” (Gen. 1:26). The church is to reflect the image of God so that God’s mission will be accomplished. God desires to see the fulfillment of the mission through missional communities who reflect the image of God to others.

A missional church understands that “churches must continuously retool themselves for effectiveness in communicating the message of hope in the rapids of changing cultures.”⁹² Change has transformed North American society, and all institutions have had to deal with the change, which has taken two, primary forms. Continuous change “develops out of what has gone before and therefore can be expected, anticipated, and managed.”⁹³ Discontinuous change “is disruptive and unanticipated; it creates situations that challenge our assumptions.”⁹⁴ It is this latter type of change that has caused churches to struggle and decline because discontinuous change brings transformation of society since the fabric of society is affected. The rules of life and living break down.

⁹²Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped By God’s Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004) , 9.

⁹³Alan J. Roxburgh, and Fred Romanul, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach A Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006) , 7.

⁹⁴Ibid.

A missional church knows the difference between being a “mission-minded” church and a missional church. A church which is mission-minded thinks and functions differently than a church that missional. Milfred Minatrea, director of the Missional Church Center, identifies three distinctions:

- The mission-minded church emphasizes *sending and supporting*; the missional church emphasizes *being and doing*.
- The mission-minded church is *representative*; the missional church is *participative*.
- The mission minded church perceives mission as *one expression of its ministry*; the missional church perceives mission as *the essence of its existence*.⁹⁵

This transition to a missional church reconnects mission-minded churches back to the incipient missional church in which Jesus said: “But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere – in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

A missional church recognizes that high expectations are expected of its members and thus communicate that expectation through its teaching and preaching ministry. Members know that commitment is essential to the life of the congregation, and realize that nominal practice of their Christian faith weakens the effectiveness of ministry by the faithful. In reality, however, “most mainline churches maintain what is interestingly called a “low threshold” to church membership. It is more difficult to become a member of many service clubs than to join most Protestant churches.”⁹⁶ Too many dying and struggling churches have low expectations of membership. Membership is treated

⁹⁵Minatrea, *Shaped By God’s Heart*, 11. For further information on the Missional Church Center, see Baptist General Convention of Texas, “What is Missional?”, Dallas, TX: Baptist General Convention of Texas, 2006), <http://www.bgct.org/texasbaptists/Page.aspx?&pid=950&srcid=2655> (accessed May 26, 2006).

⁹⁶Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 244-245.

casually, thus “it is too easy for members to disappear from the radar screen of churches with low-threshold membership requirements. Low-threshold churches suffers from associated poor accountability among members.”⁹⁷ A missional practice of a missional church is to set clear and high standards and then enforce them. This becomes the challenge for a missional church.

A missional church comprehends that authentic Christian lives are a strong message for people to see, both inside and outside the church. Being real in Christian character makes a faith community highly regarded and the church vital, as was seen in the life of Jesus. “That night Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests, along with his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners. (There were many people of this kind among the crowds that followed Jesus” (Mark. 2:15). Jesus was real and authentic in his character, and many people were attracted to Him because of his authenticity. He loved people genuinely. He allowed them to be imperfect. He always encouraged them. He cared for them. A missional practice of a missional church incorporated people into the life of the church through discipleship or spiritually-forming groups so that they can live together in real and authentic relationships.

A missional church realizes the necessity of obedience, as called and demanded by Jesus. “But even more blessed are all who hear the Word of God and put it into practice” (Luke 11:28). The goal of Bible study is not primarily knowledge; it is the transformation of a disciple’s life. Christian believers need to put into action what they study; otherwise, the spiritual life becomes a life full of trivia knowledge. All the teachings in the Bible should lead to greater obedience to Christ. “Teaching to obey underscores the high commitment to God’s Word found in missional communities.

⁹⁷Minatrea, *Shaped By God’s Heart*, 31.

Whether in corporate worship, personal devotion, equipping ministries, cells, or Life Transformation Groups, these congregations respect the Bible and its capacity to impart life direction for disciples of Jesus Christ.”⁹⁸ A missional community has a high regard for the Word of God.

From various missional churches, various “We Believe” statements affirm the importance of God’s Word in the life of the congregation:

The Bible is God’s word to all men. It was written by human authors, under the supernatural guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the supreme source of truth for Christian beliefs and living.⁹⁹

We believe that the Bible is the Word of God. Through it, God reveals Himself to us. The entire Bible is God-breathed and God-inspired. The Old and New Testaments are the norm and guide upon which we base our faith.¹⁰⁰

We believe the scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments are the inspired word of God. (2 Timothy 3:16-17) We believe the Holy Spirit guided and directed human authors to create God’s written means of communication with us, which reveals God’s love and plan to be in relationship with all of humanity. The Bible is God’s blueprint for living the Christian life and is our source for faith and practice.¹⁰¹

We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.¹⁰²

The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is the only written Word of God. Inspired by God and written by human authors...the Bible reveals all that is necessary for knowing God’s will, salvation and Christian growth. It is the guide and final authority for faith and conduct of individuals and the teaching and purpose of the Church.¹⁰³

⁹⁸Ibid., 57.

⁹⁹Saddleback Church, “What We Believe: About the Bible,” (Lake Forest, CA: Saddleback Church, 2007), <http://www.saddleback.com/flash/believe2.html>. (accessed February 28, 2007).

¹⁰⁰Community Church of Joy, “What We Believe: Statement of Faith,” (Glendale, AZ: Community Church of Joy, 2007), http://www.joyonline.org_about/whatwebelieve.php. (accessed February 28, 2007).

¹⁰¹Ginghamsburg Church, “Statement of Faith: The Bible,” (Tipp City, OH: Ginghamsburg Church, 2007), <http://ginghamsburg.org/whatwebelieve/>. (accessed February 28, 2007).

¹⁰²Mission Hills Church, “Statement of Faith: Section 1 – The Word of God,” (Greenwood Village, CO: Mission Hills Church, 2007), http://missionhills.org/downloads/Statement_of_Faith.pdf. (accessed February 28, 2007).

A missional church values worship as a high priority in the life of the faithful and obedient community. God's Word states, "Worship only the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt with such mighty miracles and power. You must worship him and bow before him; offer sacrifices to him alone" (2 Kings 17:36). Worship as a community activity expresses in concrete action the love of God, as does our individual worship experiences. Whether as the Body of Christ or as individuals, genuine worship emerges from spiritual foundations as rooted in God's Word.

The primary foundation of worship is that "as God above all, the Lord Almighty is our Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, and Deliver; and as the Sovereign of the universe, He is worthy of our worship and deserving of our praise."¹⁰⁴ God is the audience in worship, corporate or individual, not the people or person. The congregation gathers to lift up spiritual worship that brings glory and honor to the Father and the Son through the power of God's Spirit. The reality, however, is that in unhealthy churches the focus becomes the people and what they receive. Unfortunately, "it seems most Christian worship is approached as an academic duty-affirming faith through holy observance, rather than as a dynamic moment anticipating life through holy expectation."¹⁰⁵ Consequently, the lack of God's power and people's passion emerge from nominal worship that has lost its purpose. In powerless and purposeless worship, the transforming entry of God's presence fails to happen. There is simply none of God's power manifesting in and through the sacrifice of worship. A missional church understands that

¹⁰³Frazier Memorial, "Our Beliefs: The Essentials We Believe," (Montgomery, AL: Frazier Memorial, 2007) <http://www.frazierumc.org/templates/cusfrazier/Details.asp?id=28965&PID=189449>. (accessed February 28, 2007).

¹⁰⁴Jack Hayford, *Worship His Majesty: How Praising the King of Kings Will Change Your Life* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2000), 241.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 242.

God needs to be the focus of worship and that worship needs to be experiential and participatory in new ways so that a fresh movement of God can happen as the community worships.

Not only is worship offered out of faithfulness and obedience to God the Creator, worship is further recognized by church leadership as important to the life of the faith community and the church's vitality as a missional community. Accordingly, worship must always be a participatory experience which is meaningful. The missional leaders of the congregation realize that "the quality of the worship service is critical to retaining visitors and newcomers as well as established church members. A vibrant congregation, through music, joyous participation, and its enthusiastic response, brings a sense of the presence of God to the worship service."¹⁰⁶ Prayerful discernment and dedicated study of God's Holy Word must guide the formation of worship services to keep the spiritual foundations intact. What must be avoided is approaches to worship that seek relevancy at the expense of biblical foundations. Worship leaders must commit to a high standard of excellence without abandoning worship foundations. However, worship needs to communicate in a manner that connects with the indigenous people of the geographic area. Worship must be a priority in the church..

A missional church understands that faith communities live in the connection with the apostles. "Missional churches believe every follower of Christ is one who is sent. All are missionaries."¹⁰⁷ Christ's followers are sent into the world to participate in the ongoing mission of God. Missional churches have moved away from a traditional understanding of Christ that saw missionary ministry as being done by professionally-

¹⁰⁶Bishop Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley, *Reclaiming the Great Commission: A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) , 176.

¹⁰⁷Minatrea, *Shaped By God's Heart*, 78.

trained persons and / or vocationally-inspired persons. With a new understanding of what it means to be a missionary, missional churches prepare and equip all persons for missionary service. Members of the faith community thus see themselves as missionaries who are connected to the apostles in God's mission and will impact the mission field in their "sphere of influence"¹⁰⁸ Integral to influential missionary engagement with postmodern culture is communication so that church members, as apostolic missionaries (those who understand their missional identity and missionary service in a dynamic connection with the apostles) engage lovingly and gently a postmodern world by understanding the times in the same spirit as the "tribe of Issachar" (1 Chron. 12:32).

A missional church expects to "transform the world through involvement and ministry."¹⁰⁹ It believes in kingdom transformation. Through the power received from the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), missional people believe that God's transforming power is still available today, and the church is making a difference in the world. Central to the release of God's power is prayer, prayer that specifically focuses on the mission field and the equipping of people to be released into the mission field. The people in a missional church pray for opportunities to be in mission. The congregation must have a passion for people which can only happen through unified, believing prayer. The congregation must be shaped by God's missional passion. Those who are sent out by the missional church comprehend that relationships stand at the heart of mission. To be effective will require entering into close relationships with people, beginning with the relationships we know

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 86.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 89.

then spreading to the world. “Being missional is not first about ministering among those we do not know, but living authentically among those we do know.”¹¹⁰

A missional church knows its primary purpose. Christian author and Saddleback Church pastor Rick Warren recognizes that churches can be driven by many unbiblical forces: tradition, personality, finances, programs, buildings, events, and seekers. For Warren, what should drive churches are biblical purposes. He writes, “What is needed today are churches that are driven by purpose instead of by other forces...the purpose driven church is a biblical and healthy alternative to traditional ways that churches have organized and operated.”¹¹¹ Members in a missional church are absolutely clear about the church’s purpose. The primary purpose is embedded in their lives as a missional people. They can answer the question, “What is the purpose of your church?”

Members are also clear about their purpose in a missional church. They also answer the question, “What is your primary purpose?” Recognizing the centrality and importance of purpose, Ted Haggard, former president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and founding pastor of New Life Church (Colorado Springs, Colorado), writes, “what is our primary purpose? I believe it is to do everything within our power to ensure that every person alive today has an opportunity to respond to the gospel. Ours is the first generation since Jesus gave the Great Commission that has the ability to communicate the gospel to every person on the planet.”¹¹² Every church that is to be missional in identity needs a clear and primary purpose, otherwise God’s mission fails to happen to full power and effectiveness.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 92.

¹¹¹Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995) , 80.

¹¹²Ted Haggard, *Your Primary Purpose* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2006) , 4.

This is not the current reality for dying and struggling churches. Every area of church life loses its purpose when the focus gets lost. Worship becomes routine and trapped into traditionalism. Evangelism gets reduced to a membership drive or invitation to church services. Fellowship turns to coffee and conversation. Ministry develops into the latest program. Mission grows into a “professional” ethos in which hired personnel do the mission. In the process of becoming purposeless, biblical foundations are weakened, distorted, or even abandoned.

A missional church recognizes that “the goal of church growth is not to get bigger. The goal is to equip more people to live as authentic disciples of Jesus Christ.”¹¹³ Membership size is not the focus. It is not that God is not interested in numerical growth. “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen.1:22).¹¹⁴ A number indicates a person, and all people are valuable to God and the kingdom. Therefore, it does concern God when churches are not effectively reaching people in their area which indicates lost purpose of being and doing. Growth needs to emerge from the motivation of passionate commitment to God’s mission, not emerge as a motivation for church survival or denominational expansion.

Missional churches, as opposed to dying churches or struggling denominations, comprehend the primary importance of God’s kingdom as emphasized by Jesus. “The thing you should want most is God's kingdom and doing what God wants. Then all these other things you need will be given to you.”¹¹⁵ Missional people will be passionate about God kingdom or reign. The kingdom of God rules over all individuals, over all churches and denominations, over creation, and over the spiritual realm. Dying churches get their

¹¹³Minatrea, *Shaped By God's Heart*, 112.

¹¹⁴Genesis 1:22 NAS (New American Standard)

¹¹⁵Matthew 6:33 NCV (New Century Version)

earthly agenda of survival confused with the kingdom agenda. In other words, survival of the church is equated to the kingdom agenda.

God's kingdom is something different. New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd sees three acts or movements: the manifestation of God's kingdom during Jesus' earthly ministry, a victory at the beginning of the Millennium (1000 year reign of Christ), and the final victory towards the end of the Millennium when Satan, death, and sin are finally defeated.¹¹⁶

Missional people are to live as Kingdom citizens in whom the character of Christ is reflected in them and out into the world, even though the kingdom is both "now" and "not yet." In making a difference today for the kingdom, missional churches "are involved in making lives better, enhancing the quality of life for those in the communities where those churches are located and to the ends of the earth."¹¹⁷ Personal ethics and morality are essential in kingdom living in the present. There is no escapist mentality for missional people. Social justice commitments must be made today. Today matters to God and to God's people who think and act missionally. The message of hope proceeds from the lives of people touched by the passion and commitment of Jesus and the kingdom. This word of hope is needed in a world filled with many hopeless circumstances.

Summary

This chapter set forth the essential biblical and theological foundations of this project: culture, ministry, leadership, church identity, and tasks. What is going to be the relationship with culture? What is ministry along with the nature of the church's

¹¹⁶George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 123.

¹¹⁷Minatrea, *Shaped By God's Heart*, 132.

ministry? What is leadership and the leadership required in postmodern times? What is the nature of church?

In addressing the issue of how churches relate to culture, this author began with H. Richard Niebuhr's classic typology and then assessed how Jesus, Paul, and the early church engaged culture. This author suggested a sixth category to Niebuhr's typology: "Christ's discerning engagement with culture." Such an approach grounds itself biblically and theologically without compromise to postmodern ethos that stands against kingdom living. Regarding ministry in postmodern times, church leaders must answer all the fundamental question, "What is ministry?" Once this question is answered, the next issue is the nature of ministry: incarnational, servant-oriented, and integrative. By integrative, this author means that ministry needs balance between evangelical (personal faith) and social (works or fruit) commitments. The fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ comes when persons do make an existential decision regarding Christ and then live out the relationship in social ministries. The Christian life is an integrative one between the personal and social commitments.

Leadership, the third foundation, is critical for congregations to thrive in the postmodern world; however, leadership needs to be missional in orientation and function. Two primary tasks are necessary for effective leadership. First, leaders must understand the times which means understanding the ethos of postmodern culture. Second, leaders must reconnect a church's self-understanding (ecclesiology) and God's mission (missiology). Dying churches have forgotten the connection. Missional leaders – leaders who keep focused on God's mission – will need to teach this connection to the entire congregation and its leaders. What is required of leaders is to keep focused on Jesus

always, keep the Word of God as the foundation for all leadership decisions and activities, take risks, and be courageous in overcoming fears that paralyze churches. Effective, missional leaders will need to unlearn old beliefs and practices of ministries, be creative and imaginative in leading the congregation, question every belief and practice with the intention of being more effective, and at all times ground ministry in biblical foundations.

The final foundation (church) needs to look and function differently in the postmodern world. Specifically, what needs to happen is the rediscovery of the missional identity. Missional churches, as does the missional leaders, appear and act differently from dying churches. Missional churches understand that ministry must change to reach people in postmodern culture. They have high expectations of members, live authentically, obey the Lord in all matters, worship passionately, and be missional in belief and ministry.

The four foundations of culture, ministry, leadership, and church all interrelate. To have a clear vision of ministry in a time which has experienced social transformation rapidly and which continues to mutate into emerging forms of contemporary culture, churches and its leaders will need to have a clear understanding of culture, ministry, leadership, and church. All four foundations interrelate because how a leader thinks in one area impacts the others. The time has come for new leadership and practices of ministry in a postmodern world. This new leadership must be nurtured among clergy leaders as well as lay persons if new forms of ministry are to be creatively dreamed and implemented in the life of the congregation. All leaders will need to think in creative ways to design and implement new ministries.

CHAPTER 6

THE LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Introductory Comments

The heart of the Leadership Conference is communication. Getting congregations on the pathway of renewal or revitalization will require communicating new concepts to leaders who desire to see their church and the church in America effective and thriving for the glory of the Triune God. Current reality forces churches and denominations to biblically and theologically reflect upon current ministry philosophies and practices of ministry. All areas of church life – worship, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, and ministry – will need careful study and critical examination, for what was effective in the past is no longer effective in postmodern times.

To instill a sense of hope amidst struggling and declining environments, this Leadership Conference aims to bring hope through engaging dialogue with contemporary culture, its impact on ministry, and the emergence of leaders who will seek to bring change into places of struggle and sometimes death. This conversation is aimed at church leaders, clergy and laity, either in a group or individual setting. These materials are adaptable to either a conference or individual teaching through mentoring. For this project, this author has limited the setting to a single conference. No matter what setting (group or individual), establishing conversation is central. This dialogue will need to be ongoing since establishing a sense of hope will come over time. Process is vital for long

term effectiveness in producing an environment which will enable and empower church leaders to depart from the past and head in new directions. The Leadership Conference is only a beginning – an entry. Changing the leadership environment in a church is like turning a cruise ship on the ocean. It will require time, but the urgency of the present reality requires the emergence of new leadership today. The time is now to begin the process of dialogue.

Preliminary Comments on Conversation One

While this conversation focuses on the conceptual aspects of the renewal scenario, it stands in connection with conversation two which centers on the essential theological foundations. In other words, conversation one stands in an integrative relationship with conversation two. Both the conceptual and theological conversations are connected with the structural (i.e., new forms of ministry) and spiritual (prayer, preaching, and teaching God's Word) aspects of this renewal paradigm. Experiencing a revitalized spirit among struggling and dying churches requires a systemic approach which is conceptual, theological, structural, and spiritual in nature.

Congregational leaders need to see the present reality in contemporary culture and the need for renewal. Effective ministry will require conversation with people who have been shaped with modern and postmodern ethos. The participants in the Leadership Conference will be presented with basic cultural concepts: the movement of culture through human history, the essentials of modern times and postmodern times, how postmodern values shape beliefs, reality, ethics, truth, and self / identity. Through conversation one, reflection quotations will be used to draw people into dialogue about

culture. Supplementing these quotations will be reflection questions and the two core questions of this project.

There will also be study on selected biblical passages (e.g., Revelation 2 and 3) which are integral to the conversation. God's Holy Word speaks about contemporary culture and the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of God's people in ministry. Systemic renewal will need to be founded upon biblical foundations. Conversation one seeks to be a dynamic conversation, biblically and conceptually.

Preliminary Comments on Conversation Two

Conversation 2 focuses on the biblical and theological foundations. Experiencing lasting renewal requires that church leaders critically engage several important concepts: relationship to culture, ministry foundations, the essence of leadership, and church identity. These four topics need to be reflected upon theologically in light of God's Holy Word.

Seeing lasting revitalization will require congregations and their leaders to decide how they will relate to the surrounding culture, modern or postmodern. In the process of answering the two core questions of this project, one's approach to culture becomes revealed. The relationship with culture leads to certain answers on the core questions. Also involved is ministry foundations. How ministry is viewed and practiced reveals how the church approaches culture and thus the tendency to answer the core questions in a specific manner. A biblical and theological foundation of ministry leads to answers on the core questions, which reveal a desire to see present reality as is and how the church needs to change. 1 Chronicles 12:32 is a key reflection passage.

Present-day churches who are struggling tend to carry on the programs and other ministry directives of the denomination, or carry on the church heritage for future generations, when they need to focus on transitioning to a missional church. To reach effectively a new generation for Christ, church leaders will need to think and act in a different way, that is leaders will need to think with a missional mindset and then practice ministry as a missionary to a culture foreign to his or her enculturation. What is required of missional leaders is different from the past. In the context of struggling and dying churches, missional leaders will need to address various fears. Missional leaders will also need to unlearn and question everything (from a missional standpoint).

This transition to a missional church will be vital for churches who desire to be effective missional outposts in the surrounding culture, whether modern or postmodern in essence. Integral to this process will be examining priorities and learning what missional churches (churches who have transitioned to missional being and practice) understand. Specific beliefs and practices have come to distinguish churches that describe themselves as missional. In the end, missional churches answer the core questions differently than churches who are struggling in this postmodern world.

While technically part of the conversation, prayer is the beginning foundation for any transition to a missional church. To catch the missional spirit as a community, the desire must come into existence through prayer. People must be praying for a missional spirit to come into existence in the life of the church. A desire for a missional spirit must become a unifying vision.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION & FUTURE APPLICATION

Introductory Remarks

The Leadership Conference was received graciously and all the participants were supportive of this author. The participants engaged the teachings with an enthusiastic spirit of learning. Throughout our time together, an honest and engaging conversation took place in which the participants asked discerning questions. Eight persons attended that ranged in ages from late forties to sixties. This author would describe the attendees as spiritually growing people who are concerned about the future of the church. These church members are inquisitive and seeking a pathway to see a difference in the church. All the attendees are present leaders of the church, and serve with a servant's conviction and passion. The conference lasted for nearly three hours, originally planned for two-and-one half.

The evening began with worship. This time together was never intended to be a worship or seminar that simply presented information. This time together was designed and implemented as a spiritual event, thus worship began the journey. A worship leader led in singing, which allowed participation by an attendee who enjoys singing and worshipping the living God. Following worship, this author discussed the reasons for this study and project, including religious shaping influences in life, the importance of church, conversion testimony, call to pastoral ministry, and ordination in the United

Methodist Church. Then, introductory remarks were shared. An overview of the evening was given followed by commentary on the reflection quotations throughout the presentations, the core questions of the project, and the urgency of renewal in the life of Valentine Church and the Nebraska Conference. It was emphasized that the quotations and questions were designed to assist in reflecting on the current state of Valentine Church as well as well as the future of the congregation. After this sharing, communion was served as a spiritual means to enter into the spiritual conversations. Originally, a meal was to follow the introductory comments; however, in planning for the evening, it became apparent that a separate meal would have taken too much time. Instead, we had cookies and coffee as we proceeded to celebrate communion.

Following the sacrament, we journeyed into Conversation 1, the conceptual foundations. There were four teachings: seeing the need, culture, postmodernism, and effects on the church. All the teachings were shown on a Powerpoint slide, including the reflection quotations and core questions. During the teachings, the attendees were encouraged to ask questions and discuss the topics. Reflections quotations were placed intermittently through the teachings. After a comment on each quotation, there was a moment of silent reflection. At the end of each teaching, the core questions were asked with a moment of silent meditation on them. At some point during the silence, the worship leader prayed a directed prayer on the teachings and core questions. A break happened after each block of teaching. This format was the same for Conversation 2, the biblical and theological foundations. There were four teachings: relationship to culture, ministry, leadership, and church. The evening closed with a prayer circle in which we prayed for each other and the witness of the church.

Personal Observations

First, this leadership conference was designed as a part of a larger teaching ministry. In other words, the teachings were designed as an entry point into a larger process of teaching church members and leaders. Further teaching gatherings were envisioned in the planning of this session. Part of the difficulty in planning was the busyness of church members and leaders. Ideally, it was the intention to present the teachings over two evenings; however, this author encountered assorted scheduling difficulties. Consequently, the teachings were presented in one evening.

Second, presenting these teachings, which were going to be new to the attendees, was too much in the time allotted for the conference, limiting the amount of discussion. The pace of the evening was quick but not hurried in a rash manner as to prevent discussion. Time prevented detailed discussion on selected teachings. For instance, more time would have been given on the discussion of cultural movements. Here is where a Powerpoint slide along with a handout helped. The teaching began to encourage creative thinking and questioning. One participant said, “I found the teachings very stimulating and thought provoking.” The participants shared in the survey that there was too much material to cover in the time allotted.

Leadership Conference Survey Results

The results from the survey revealed that the participants came to the conference with the realization that United Methodist churches have been struggling and declining in membership and worship attendance.

This belief has come directly from the bishop's initiative to make disciples over the past year. There has been much communication from the bishop and denominational officials about the present state of the conference. Thus, they saw the need for church renewal among United Methodist churches, including Valentine United Methodist Church.

However, a majority of the participants believed that few members in the congregation (twenty-five percent) understand fully the present struggle of the church and need for a revitalized spirit outside the leadership of Valentine Church. To the survey question, "This church exists to.....," one response was: "[to] serve its members with a church home with little regard to the community or mission." The spirit of that comment reflects a common sentiment among church members and friends.

The core questions of the project were found to be stimulating by all participants and necessary to critically reflect upon. They were new to all participants, along with the writings of Easum and Sweet. To Easum's question whether United Methodist churches will become extinct as the dinosaurs, the participant's answers revealed an interesting response. No participant answered, "Yes" with a few answering, "No." Most participants recognized the potential of extinction by answering, "Somewhat." Regarding Valentine Church, thirty-eight percent viewed the church as being "on the way" toward extinction. To Sweet's question whether United Methodist Churches are "seizing the day" and thriving, the participants' responses reflect the same pattern in answering Easum's question. There was not a sense of hopelessness among the participants during the conference.

In terms of knowledge and understanding of culture, the movement of culture in history, and postmodernism, the survey surprisingly revealed that the participants had

some knowledge. Few had no knowledge of culture or postmodernism but a better understand the culture and postmodernism following the conference. In retrospect, this introductory knowledge about culture and postmodernism is related directly to this author's previous teaching and preaching ministry in private conversations and worship, which had been happening over the past year before the conference. Participants grew in their understanding and knowledge of culture and postmodernism and recognize that United Methodist churches, including Valentine Church, have become disorientated due to all the cultural change and thus ineffective in present ministry.

In terms of leadership, the participants came to an understanding that the ideas of missional church and missional leadership are new to them. They recognized that new leaders in the congregation with new ways of thinking will be integral to the fullness of a revitalized spirit. Regarding the Valentine Church, the participants recognized that the reclaiming of a missional identity (i.e., a missional church) would be a vital area of strengthening for the congregation. When asked, "Do members of Valentine Church believe that they are being sent out into the world?" eighty-eight percent of the respondents answered, "No." Despite the present state of the church, the participants viewed Valentine Church "on the way" toward a revitalized and missional spirit. There is a hopeful spirit among the participants with the recognition that much hard work is ahead for the church.

How Will You Act on What You Have Heard Today

There was a wide range of attention-grabbing responses to this survey question. One participant responded, "Urge others to see the opportunities they have to spread the

Gospel.” Another expressed uncertainty, “[I] don’t know at this point.” One recognized that before any action, there must be “much prayer asking God for discernment, courage & wisdom.” Further, this participant recognized the centrality of seeking God’s will for direction. Other participants saw the need for discerning and guiding prayer. Interestingly one participant responded, “I see a better (different) perspective from a minister’s point of view of the problems the church faces with the declining membership.” Another participant was challenged “to continue to be more focused on issues of culture and the term postmodern. Interest in continued education on subjects concerning the spiritual health of this church.” Finally, one participant was “inspired to be part of the leadership to bring the United Methodist Church to its full potential and understanding of discipleship.”

Overall, both conversations encouraged and helped the participants see Valentine Church and the Nebraska Conference in their present predicament. The statistical data helped illumine the present reality, as did Revelation 2 and 3. Through the conversations, it became evident that new leadership would be essential to see the church grow in worship attendance and grow spiritually in the love of Christ, in the spiritual thirst for the Word of God, and in the desire for revival and intercessory prayer. The participants recognized the spiritual growth of the congregation through the preaching and teaching ministry over the past year. Signs of reform are beginning to grow in Valentine Church.

Future Application

Heading into this leadership conference, this author accepted that this gathering would be part of a larger process of discerning. Also recognized was the difficulty in

planning any gathering for more than one evening due to the busyness of people's lives and their schedules. From the beginning, it has been this author's intention to develop teaching modules from this project which could be used for mentoring. These modules would allow the teaching materials to be processed in a manageable approach that did not overload the person being mentored.

While future conferences will be planned and implemented, individual mentoring of leaders and clergy colleagues is now underway. Through individual mentoring, conversations on specialized or deeper-focused teachings will allow for a more personal interaction with the teaching materials and biblical study. For instance, more time can be spent studying and reflecting on Revelation 2 and 3 and the missional church. The qualities of a missional church are vital and need proper teaching moment that will allow for thoughtful conversation and questions. More time can be focused on praying for congregational reform and revival. More time can be spent on sharing ideas.

This mentoring of leaders in the congregation is underway, and will continue as an integral part of the teaching ministry in spiritually forming missional leaders. Also underway is mentoring of clergy colleagues. This is only recently begun, so there has been limited time in sharing the ideas of this renewal paradigm. There is consensual agreement among clergy in this author's covenant group that reform and revival are desperately needed among United Methodist churches. It is this author's intention to continue conversing with colleagues about the renewal ideas of this project. Presently, there is a spirit of discouragement among clergy because of the dire spiritual conditions found in the churches as expressed in Revelation 2 and 3.

APPENDIX 1

Congregational Development Team Report

Rev. Alloway is the Sr. Pastor of St. Mark United Methodist Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. Rev. Alloway was asked to chair the Congregational Development Team by Bishop Shearer. This report was delivered by him at 2005 Annual Conference Session.

During my twenty-two years of ministry in Nebraska, I've had the privilege of addressing our Annual Conference on several occasions, both as Registrar and as Chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry. At those conferences, I announced the candidates for ministry to this distinguished body. Today, however, I'm here in a different capacity; today, I'm here on behalf of the Congregational Development Team, to announce far more sobering news: our Annual Conference **is dying**.

In 1970, the membership of the Nebraska Conference was 148,004 members. On December 31, 2004, the Conference membership stood at 84,337. That's a loss of 63,667 members. **63,667 members – gone.**

We also have 14,012 *fewer* people in average worship attendance – which is roughly the equivalent of losing our current worship attendance in the Northeast, Northwest, Central, and South Central Districts *combined*.

Which means: if the current rate of membership loss continues, we will no longer be a viable annual conference by 2015, based on the criteria set forth in our Book of Discipline.

That's the bad news.

The good news is this: We are still big enough, strong enough, and (I believe) wise enough to seize an opportunity to reverse our downward spiral! **Now is the time to rekindle the fire of faith in the churches of the Nebraska Annual Conference!**

The decisions we make at this annual conference will have a profound effect on whether we move forward and thrive, or continue our rapid decent into mediocrity and oblivion. *The choice is ours.*

We claim, as a conference, that our core purpose is to go into the world and make disciples of Jesus Christ; yet, in reality, disciple making is often relegated to committees that exist in the margins of our budgets and at the bottom of our priority lists. That has to change. The “main thing” has to become the main thing, once again.

Nebraska has a population of 1.7 million people. According to a Percept demographic study, approximately 11% of the population already has a United Methodist preference. This translates to roughly 191,000 people, who say they prefer the United Methodist Church.

Now, the membership of the United Methodist Church in Nebraska currently stands at 84,337; in other words, only 44% of the people in Nebraska with a preference for United Methodism are actually members of our churches! This means we have the potential for reaching almost 107,000 people in our communities who already prefer us to other denominations! And that's not even counting the thousands of people with neither a church affiliation nor a denominational preference.

But how do we reach these folks?

Experts in the field of church growth and development believe one of the best ways for reaching *new* people is by planting *new* churches where these people live. A point of clarification here: a new church can be the result of a merger between three or more existing congregations, or it can be a second campus for one congregation, or it can be a new church start—but experts say “new churches” (in whatever form they take) are the way to go.

Stephen Compton, the director of Congregational Development in the North Carolina Annual Conference, and author of “Rekindling the Mainline: New Life through New Churches” offers this rationale:

1. Statistically speaking, new people in new areas are more likely to join new churches, rather than old churches. I'm sure we can all think of exceptions, but that's generally the way it goes.
2. New churches are often more likely to be open to new people. Who among us hasn't dealt with church members who claim to be “open to growth” – but who also say they want their church to remain “just the way it is now” – where “everybody knows everybody else”. Of course, this mindset is antithetical to growth and development. You can't remain “just the way you are,” and grow, too. Growth *is* change.
3. New churches find it easier to live out new models of mission and ministry. Again, this harkens back in the mindset of doing things the way they've always been done; you can't embark on new ministries, or new styles of worship, if you are determined to follow the status quo.

So, new churches have some definite advantages when it comes to attracting new people – but how do we go about starting these new congregations?

Well, the Congregational Development Team is suggesting the implementation of a proven method of church planting that has been highly successful in other United Methodist Conferences.

First and foremost, a new church will need the *right pastor*. Not everyone is called to this type of ministry, and it's imperative that the right person be appointed to the right place, at the right time, if a new church is to be successful.

As for "the *right place*," that's almost as important as finding the right pastor – but "the right place" doesn't necessarily mean a permanent facility – or even land! Experience has shown that the most successful new churches initially meet in rented facilities (land is typically purchased years later).

And, as for the *right time*: the time is **NOW**.

The Congregational Development Team is proposing that the Nebraska Annual Conference plan for at least one new church start in the next 12 months, and two additional church starts within the twelve months following that. We further propose that new churches receive a subsidy from our Annual Conference limited to no more than three years, on a declining scale.

I see some folks out there with their arms folded across their chests, and their head shaking from side to side. I'm guessing you folks are thinking to yourselves, "We can't do this." Well, I'm here to tell you: **We have to!** We *have* to do this, or our conference will die – and I don't know about you, but I'm not ready to "go gently into that good night."

I believe in the future of the Nebraska Annual Conference.

I agreed to chair the Congregational Development Team because I believe that as long as there's still breath in this part of the body of Christ, there's still hope for our future. I believe that God is calling us (as a conference) to greater heights of dynamic, meaningful, inspiring, worship, and I believe God is calling us to grow in our faith and in our love and in our service to our community and the world. But, most of all, I believe that God is calling us to make disciples for Jesus Christ.

We can do this.

We **must**.

APPENDIX 2

Modern and Postmodern Comparative Reactions by Dr. Larry Solomon

<u>Modern</u>	<u>Postmodern</u>
Rational	irrational
Scientific	anti-scientific or unscientific
utopian, elitist,	belief in universal values
populist claim,	local values only
democratic	feminist and minority hegemony
hierarchical	anarchical
organized	non-totalized, chaotic, fragmented
centered	dispersed
European, Western	"multicultural"
Generalizing	non-generalizing
Determinate	indeterminate
Objective	subjective
objectivist values, masterpieces	values determined socially and individually
formal disciplines	informal, undisciplined
purposeful, meaningful	meaningless or purely subjective meaning
construction	destruction (pomos prefer the euphemism deconstruction")
belief in progress	no progress possible
theoretical	concrete, non-theorizing
analytical & synthetic	non-analytical, rhetorical, based on belief
simplicity, elegance,	spartan, streamlined
decoration, elaboration,	convoluted, evasive
logical, scientific	illogical, superstitious, opinion based
cause-effect	chance
linear	haphazard, "nonlinear"
harmonious, integrated	non-integrated
permanence	transience
abstract	concrete
communicative /	
prefer to be understood	prefer to be arcane
unified, coherent	eclectic, incoherent
objective truth	truth is socially constructed
apolitical to occasionally political	politicizes everything
disciplines primarily indifferent to	
power struggles	political power is of primary concern
reality is not anthropocentric	reality is socially constructed and anthropocentric

This chart can be found online at <http://solomonsmusic.net/postmod.htm> (accessed on September 5, 2005).

APPENDIX 3

Modern and Postmodern Comparative Reactions by Ihab Hassan¹

<u>Modern</u>	<u>Postmodern</u>
Modernism	Postmodernism
Romanticism / Symbolism	Pataphysis / Dadaism
Form (conjunctive, closed)	Antiform (disjunctive, open)
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Mastery / Logos	Exhaustion / Silence
Art Object / Finished Work	Process / performance / Happening
Distance	Participation
Creation / Totalization	Decreation / Deconstruction
Synthesis	Antithesis
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre / Boundary	Text / Intertext
Semantics	Rhetoric
Paradigm	Syntagm
Hypotaxis	Parataxis
Metaphor	Combination
Selection	Combination
Root / Depth	Rhizome / Surface
Interpretation / Reading	Against Interpretation / Misreading
Signified	Signifier
<i>Lisible</i> (Readerly)	<i>Scriptible</i> (Writerly)
Narrative / <i>Grand Histoire</i>	Anti-Narrative / <i>Petite Histoire</i>
Master Code	Idiolect
Symptom	Desire
Type	Mutant
Genital / Phallic	Polymorphous / Androgynous
Paranoia	Schizophrenic
Origin / Cause	Difference – Difference / Trace
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
Metaphysics	Irony
Determinacy	Indeterminacy
Transcendence	Immanence

¹Ihab Hassan, "Toward A Concept of Postmodernism," in Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 152. Hassan has drawn from many fields in constructing these dichotomies.

APPENDIX 4		1984	119,689
Membership Figures ¹		1983	122,823
2003	86,260	1982	125,601
2002	87981	1981	126,017
2001	90146	1980	127,680
2000	92,223	1979	129,726
1999	94,388	1978	132,277
1998	96,316	1977	134,172
1997	98,598	1976	135,575
1996	101,598	1975	137,042
1995	103,296	1974	138,823
1994	105,374	1973	140,722
1993	107,524	1972	142,659
1992	109,608	1971	144,154
1991	110,943	1970	146,021
1990	112,817	1969	147,531
1989	114,289		
1988	115,265		
1987	116,286		
1986	118,174		
1985	119,689		

¹Original, statistical research by the author from *Nebraska Conference Journals*, 1969 to 2005.

APPENDIX 5			1984	3,134	- 2.55 %
Membership Losses ¹			1983	2,778	- 2.21 %
2003	1,721	- 1.96 %	1982	416	- 0.33 %
2002	2,165	- 2.40 %	1981	1,663	- 1.30 %
2001	2,077	- 2.25 %	1980	2,046	- 1.58 %
2000	2,165	- 2.29 %	1979	2,551	- 1.93 %
1999	1,928	- 2.00 %	1978	1,895	- 1.41 %
1998	2,282	- 2.31 %	1977	1,403	- 1.03 %
1997	3,000	- 2.95 %	1976	1,467	- 1.07 %
1996	1,698	- 1.64 %	1975	1,781	- 1.28 %
1995	2,078	- 1.97 %	1974	1,899	- 1.35 %
1994	2,150	- 2.00 %	1973	1,937	- 1.36 %
1993	2,084	- 1.90 %	1972	1,495	- 1.04 %
1992	1,335	- 1.20 %	1971	1,867	-1.28 %
1991	1,874	- 1.66 %	1970	1,511	- 1.02 %
1990	1,472	- 1.29 %	1969	147,531	
1989	976	- 0.85 %	*****		
1988	1,021	- 0.88 %	This analysis traces the statistical development since 1970. The 1969 figure is a baseline membership figure.		
1987	1,888	- 1.60 %			
1986	1,515	- 1.27 %			
1985	0	0 %			

¹Original, statistical research by the author from *Nebraska Conference Journals*, 1969 to 2005.

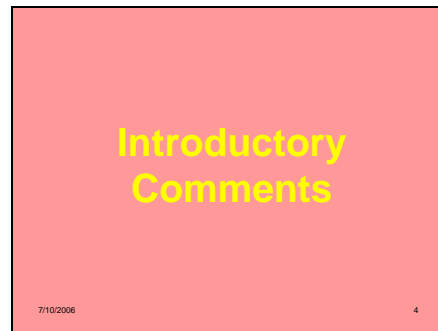
APPENDIX 6

Leadership Conference

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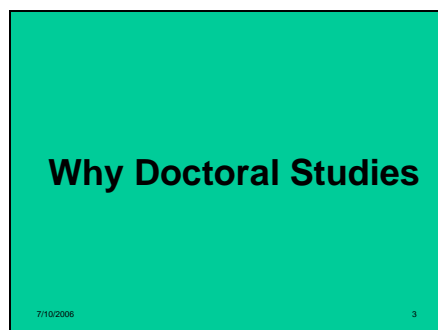
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7

Conversation 1

Conceptual Foundations

- Seeing the Need
- Culture
- Postmodernism
- Effects on the Church

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Slide
10

Reflection Quote

“As a United Methodist pastor for twenty-eight years, I am convinced that our denomination and our people are desperate for a fresh outpouring of God’s power. We need a wake-up call!”

-- Terry Teykl, United Methodist Prayer Evangelist

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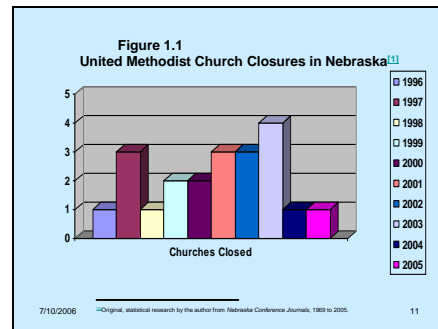
1. Seeing the Need

Pastoral Observations

Congregational Development Team
Report: 2005 Annual Conference

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Emerging Warning Signs:

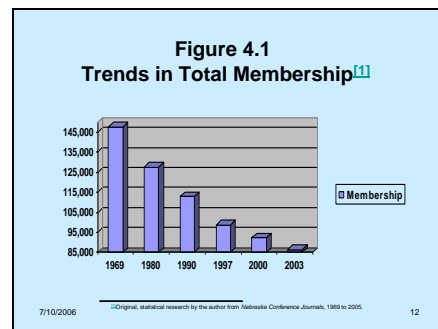
The United Methodist Church Membership

1999 – 8,365,816

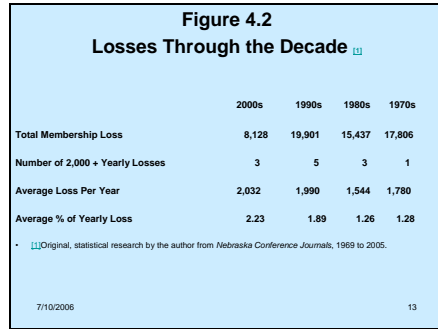
2002 – 8,258,352

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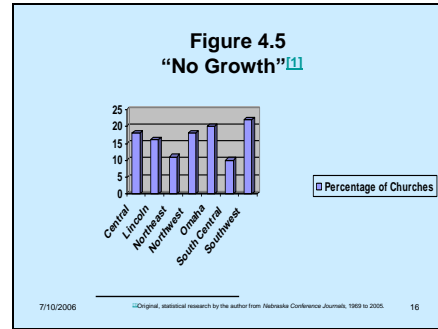
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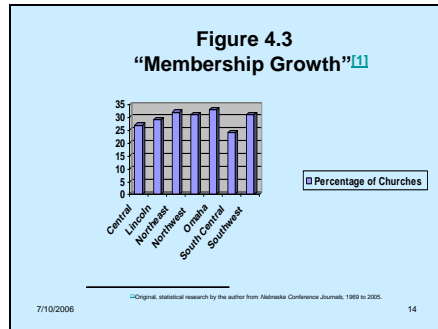
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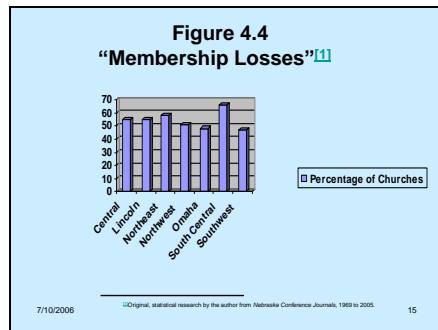
Present Happenings:

Struggling Churches

- the idol of religiosity -- Isaiah 1:11
- No joy
- Denominational competition
- Preservation of heritage

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Consequently,

Present State of Anxiety, Struggle, and Decline

A survival mentality

In-focus mentality
...for some, congregational closure

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19

"Today's maintenance-centered Church ministers primarily to the faithful...It is not particularly attractive to the unchurched except philosophically, paying only lip service to the idea of evangelism. In the maintenance church, both clergy and laity lose sight of their obligation to make disciples."

-- Bishop Payne

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Present Happenings in Postmodern Culture

Rise of

- Secularism
- Consumerism
- Materialism
- Individualistic autonomy
- Nominalism

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Issues Raised from Current Reality

- Urgency for Renewal or Revitalization
- Time for Change
- Time for New Ministry
- Desperate Need to Understand the Times
- Effective Leadership
- Reclaiming of Missional Identity
- Core Questions

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Heart of the Matter

Not primarily a matter of

Denominational Affiliation

Ministry Practices

Church Leadership

Motivation

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Core Questions

"Will many of our congregations, like the dinosaurs, become extinct?"

-- Bill Easum

"Is your church ready to seize tomorrow?"

-- Leonard Sweet

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Heart of the Matter

Primarily A Matter of

Lost Ecclesial or Church Identity

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"I see spiritual amnesia, a vague cluelessness about who we are and what God has called us to be and do."
-- Paul Nixon, United Methodist

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Bible Study

The Churches of the Apocalypse

Revelation 2

Revelation 3

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Need for Congregational Revitalization

"The handwriting is on the wall. Many mainline Protestant churches are broke, or already on financial life-support systems.
Some church buildings are lucky: endowments keep the empty pews warm, the rooms well-lit, and the roof secure."
-- Leonard Sweet

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In the context of the present reality,
"Will many of our congregations, like the dinosaurs, become extinct?"
-- Bill Easum

"Is your church ready to seize tomorrow?"
-- Leonard Sweet

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Need for Congregational Revitalization

"Christian institutions, too, are beginning to realize that their methods of evangelism, discipleship, and fund-raising simply do not work well anymore."
-- Chuck Smith Jr.

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Intercessory Prayer

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2. Culture -- Definition

“The system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning.”

-- University of Manitoba's Department of Cultural Anthropology

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The Ancient Cultural Movement 2,500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E.

Epistemology & Belief Regional worldview. Deities: considered regional and territorial.
Understanding Power and faith were in the kings, empires, and local deities.
Communication Oral
Authority In oracles, poets, kings, and prophets
Theme “What is man that you are mindful of him?” -- Psalm 8:4

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Example: Church Culture

- The Global Church
- The American Church
- Denominational Expressions
- The United Methodist Church

Complex and Mystifying

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The Medieval Cultural Movement 500 C.E. – 1500 C.E.

Epistemology & Belief Judeo-Christian, God-centered
Understanding Power and faith were in the church
Communication Manuscript & Oral
Authority In the Bible (but only as taught by the church)
Theme “I believe in order that I may understand.” -- Anselm (1033-1099)

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The Ancient Cultural Movement
2,500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E.

The Medieval Cultural Movement
500 C.E. – 1500 C.E.

The Modern Cultural Movement
1500 C.E. to 2000 and beyond.

The Postmodern Cultural Movement
2000 and beyond

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The Modern Cultural Movement 1500 C.E. to 2000 and beyond.

Epistemology & Belief Shift to human-centered trust in reason to discover truth
Understanding Power and faith were in human reasoning, science, and logic.
Communication Print
Authority In reason and logic
Theme “I think, therefore I am.” -- Descartes (1596-1650)

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The Postmodern Cultural Movement 2000 and beyond	
Epistemology & Belief	Self-determined, pluralistic view of culture and religion. Conflicting truths and beliefs are accepted.
Understanding	Power and faith is in the personal experience.
Communication	
Image & Media	
Authority	Suspicious of authority. Bible is one of many religious writings.
Theme	"If it makes you happy, it can't be that bad." – Sheryl Crow
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3. Postmodernism	
• Definition	
• Modern Times	
• Forms of Postmodernism	
• Descriptions	
• Salient Features	
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In the context of culture...	
"Will many of our congregations, like the dinosaurs, become extinct?"	-- Bill Easum
"Is your church ready to seize tomorrow?"	-- Leonard Sweet
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Definition of Postmodernism	
What is postmodernism?	
"a complex set of reactions to modern philosophy and its presuppositions, rather than to any agreement of substantive doctrines or philosophical questions."	
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Intercessory Prayer	
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something has fundamentally changed in society, no matter how one understands postmodernism	
More than a generational issue	
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Modern Times

- (1) "thinking sought to replace faith in God with human reason";
- (2) "new and important role" of science;
- (3) "science was assumed to be capable of revealing the whole truth about the universe";
- (4) "science became more secular";
- (5) "inherent humanism of modernity became more prominent"; and
- (6) elevation of the "single individual."

— Chuck Smith Jr.

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Salient Feature: Beliefs

- No transcendent meaning exists outside the community that gives meaning to beliefs.
- Beliefs become localized to a specific social community with no universal foundation.
- Beliefs then become privatized and relativized to what community one belongs to.
- No absolute or foundational belief exists in the postmodern world because beliefs are constantly changing, constantly being socially created through consumer choices or a community's language of beliefs.

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Forms of Postmodernism

- Academic
- Cultural

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Salient Feature: Beliefs

- Beliefs are held to be equally true.
- All beliefs are to be respected and tolerated.
- The belief of a New Age practitioner is equally valid as the belief for the practitioner of the Christian faith.
- The belief of the neo-pagan is equally valid as the belief of Wiccan believer.

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Detweiler & Taylor "Post"

Post-national	Post-Christian
Post-rational	
Post-literal	
Post-scientific	
Post-sexual	
Post-racial	
Post-human	
Post-traumatic	
Post-ethical	

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"North America possessed a Christian culture that served as the foundation for the religious worldview of the American people and was predominantly characterized as Protestant."

-- Pastor Dr. Robert Brewer

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**"Postmodernism refuses to privilege
(give priority to) one culture or
worldview over another."**

**-- Capo Beach Calvary pastor Chuck
Smith Jr.**

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**Postmodern Themes
from the movie**

- Powerful forces attack us that we cannot deal with.
- Relentless forces continue to hunt down human beings.
- Survival is by luck and chance.
- Authority is useless.
- The word termination carries with it the idea that some entity has the power to kill.

– Arthur Asa Berger

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Salient Features: Reality

- Existence becomes a creation or construct by each human being.
- Plural realities
- Individuals and groups of people are encouraged to create realities and freely express themselves.

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Salient Features: Ethics

- Relative, situational, localized
- No consensual ethical behavior
- It is up to each individual to live according to a self and socially created personal ethic as interpreted and allowed by a specific community.

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**Video Clip
"The Terminator"**

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- What becomes the basis of moral judgments?
- How are moral judgments even made?
- Who ultimately knows what is right and what is wrong?

• Video Clip from Seinfeld

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Salient Features: Truth

- Truth turns into a product of one's own understanding, historically and culturally conditioned.
- Truth becomes a perspective.
- Video Clip from
 - "X-Files"

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Positive Evaluation

- Limit of Human Reason
- Recognition of Marginalized Voices
- De-emphasis on Self
- Manipulation of Truth
- Knowledge Beyond Science

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Salient Features: Self / Identity

"Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction."
-- Kenneth Gergen

Video Clip from
"Zelig"

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Theological Reflection

- Beliefs -- 1 Thessalonians 5:23
- Reality -- Genesis 1:1
- Ethics -- Exod. 23:6; Deut. 24:17; Matthew 12:30, 31
- Truth -- Psalm 86:15
- Self -- Genesis 1:26-2:25

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Negative Evaluation

- Contradictory nature
- Disorientation and Terror
- Epistemological and Reality Crisis
- Lack of Reconstruction
- On the Pathway toward Relativism

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In the context of postmodernism...

"Will many of our congregations, like the dinosaurs, become extinct?"
-- Bill Easum

"Is your church ready to seize tomorrow?"
-- Leonard Sweet

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Intercessory
Prayer

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Intercessory
Prayer

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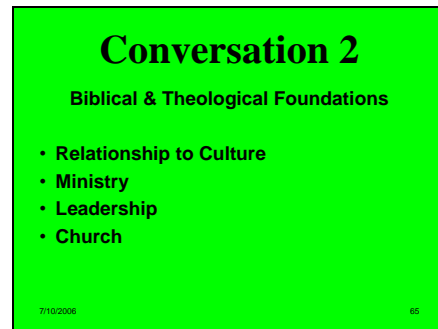


4. Impact on the Church

- Impact on the Church
 - Disorientation
 - Ineffectiveness
 - Loss of Identity
 - Loss of Purpose

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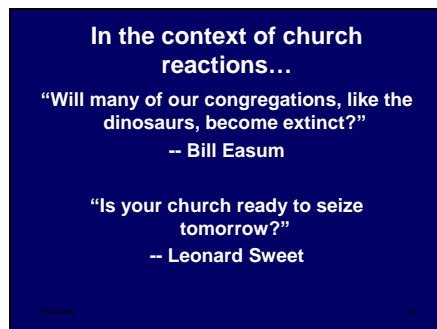
Conversation 2

Biblical & Theological Foundations

- Relationship to Culture
- Ministry
- Leadership
- Church

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In the context of church reactions...

"Will many of our congregations, like the dinosaurs, become extinct?"
-- Bill Easum

"Is your church ready to seize tomorrow?"
-- Leonard Sweet

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1. Relationship to Culture

H. Richard Niebuhr
"Christ & Culture"

- Christ against Culture
- Christ of Culture
- Christ above Culture
- Christ & Culture in Paradox
- Christ the Transformer of Culture
- This author's view

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2. Ministry

- What is Ministry?
“God’s ministry from the very beginning.”
-- Ray S. Anderson
- “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1).
- The first act of creation shows the beginning of God in ministry.

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“What flourishing churches have in common is that they are led by people who possess and deploy the spiritual gift of leadership.”
-- Bill Hybels

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3. Leadership

- Critical Need for New Leadership
- What is Leadership?
- Tasks of Missional Leaders
- What is Required of Leaders?
- Fears to Overcome
- Unlearning Leadership
- Creative & Imaginative Leadership
- Questioning Leadership
- Spiritual Leadership

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What is Leadership?

“leaders who can read the Scriptures with fresh eyes, relating the story of redemption to the human condition in its present cultural contexts – contexts that are increasingly multicultural and influenced by global trends.”

-- Eddie Gibbs

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Critical Need for New Leadership

Church in America

- A crisis of faith
- A crisis of spiritual depth
- A crisis of innovation
- A crisis of leadership

-- George Barna

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Task of Missional Leaders

Task 1

“Understand the Times”

1 Chronicles 12:32

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Sources in Understanding Culture

- USA Today newspaper
- Relevantmagazine.com
- Internet
- Magazines: People, US, In Touch,
- Television: MTV, VH1 E! Entertainment, Oprah

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What is Required of Leaders

"Keep Focused on Jesus"

Bible Centered

Risk Taking

Courage

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Importance

"the church is no longer one of the central institutions that shapes values and meets the social, emotional and spiritual needs of the Western world... the church's role has become much more modest and marginal..."

-- Eddie Gibbs

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Courageous leaders will need to address many fears that exist in dying churches, especially as they face the missional setting of postmodern culture.

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Task of Missional Leaders

Task 2

"Reclaiming Missional Identity"

Mission is more than ministry of the church; it is the nature of the church itself.

It is the shape of God's heart coming alive in the congregation through the participative commitment of the church.

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Unlearning Leadership

"Unlearning is about going in a different direction.

It requires us to identify ways we were wrong and to rebuild in a new direction.

understand the times in which they live.

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Creative & Imaginative Leadership

- Worship
- Evangelism
- Discipleship
- Fellowship
- Ministry
- Historical Connection

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**Questioning Leaders
also ask**

**Where does the church goes
from here?**

**The Pathway of Missional
Thinking and Church**

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Questioning Leadership

**is desperately needed
from courageous leaders.**

an integral leadership trait

the transforming power of questions

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4. Church

- What is A Missional Church?
- Denominations
- Priorities
- What A Missional Church Understands?

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Questioning leaders asks

**"Will many of our congregations, like the
dinosaurs, become extinct?"**
-- Bill Easum

**"Is your church ready to seize
tomorrow?"**
-- Leonard Sweet

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What is A Missional Church?

**"The church's crisis is one of
fundamental vocation, of calling to
God's mission, of being, doing, and
saying witness in faithfulness
to Jesus Christ, the Lord"**
-- Darrell Guder

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"Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God...Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world...God is a missionary God...a movement from God to the world...There is church because there is mission, not vice versa."
-- David J. Bosch

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Denominations

"Denominations may have legitimacy, but they must be evaluated critically in order to assess the extent to which they represent all that God intends the church to be."
-- Darrell Guder

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A Missional Church is

"a church that is shaped by participating in God's mission, which is to set things right in a broken and sinful world, to redeem it, and to restore it to what God has always intended for the world."

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Denominations

the institutional church in North America needs an infusion of missional spirit to help dying churches regain their sense of missional identity...

As does local churches

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Denominations

Denominations presently serve as the primary form of the Church in North America; however, this has been and continues to change as this postmodern culture emerges.

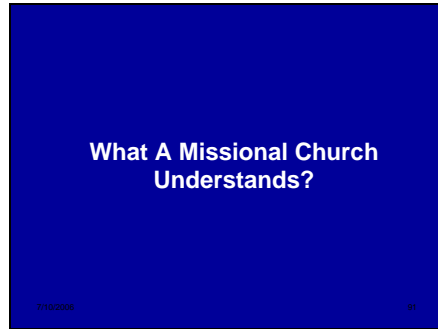
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Priorities

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APPENDIX 7

Post-Conference Leadership Survey

Instructions: On the appropriate question, please fill-in-the-blank, circle or place a check mark next to your response. This is an anonymous survey so please do not sign your name. Thank you for taking time to fill out this survey. This evaluation will be used to improve future Leadership Conferences.

1. Before coming to this Leadership Conference, did you have any realization that United Methodist churches in Nebraska are struggling and declining in worship attendance and membership?

Yes

No

2. How did the trends in total membership loss in United Methodist churches surprise you?

Very little

Somewhat

Strongly

3. Which description of struggling churches most surprised you?

- ☐ The idol of religiosity
- ☐ No joy
- ☐ Denominational competition
- ☐ Preservation of heritage

4. “Today’s maintenance-centered Church ministers primarily to the faithful...It is not particularly attractive to the unchurched except philosophically, paying only lip service to the idea of evangelism. In the maintenance church, both clergy and laity lose sight of their obligation to make disciples?” – Bishop Payne

Do you agree with the sentiments of Bishop Payne’s quotation?

Yes

Somewhat

No

5. Do you see the need for church revitalization?

Yes

Somewhat

No

6. Is it time for this church to experience the revitalizing work of God?

Yes

Somewhat

No

7. Will leadership will be required for revitalization in churches to occur?

Yes

Somewhat

No

8. In light of the current statistical trends, do you believe that “many United Methodist churches, like the dinosaurs, will become extinct?”

Yes

Somewhat

No

9. Will Valentine Church become extinct?

Yes

No

On the Way

10. In light of the current statistical trends, do you believe that many United Methodist churches are “seizing the day” and thriving?

Yes

No

On the Way

11. Is this church seizing the day and thriving?

Yes

No

On the Way

12. What percentage of congregational members sees the current struggle of this church?

_____ %

13. What percentage of congregational members understands that the primary issue causing the church to struggle is lost church identity?

_____ %

14. This church exists to _____

15. Were the Core Questions (Sweet and Easum) thought-provoking?

Yes

Somewhat

No

16. Coming to the Leadership Conference, did you have knowledge or an understanding?

About Culture

Yes

No

Some

About Cultural Movements

Yes

No

Some

About Postmodernism	Yes	No	Some
---------------------	-----	----	------

17. “North America possessed a Christian culture that served as the foundation for the religious worldview of the American people and was predominately characterized as Protestant.” – Dr. Robert Brewer

Is the idea expressed in Dr. Brewer’s quotation new to your understanding?

Yes	No
-----	----

18. With the rise of a new culture – labeled as postmodernism by cultural anthropologists – do you understand how churches have come to experience the following?

<input type="radio"/> Disorientation	Yes	No
<input type="radio"/> Ineffectiveness	Yes	No
<input type="radio"/> Lost Identity	Yes	No
<input type="radio"/> Lost Purpose	Yes	No

19. Is viewing ministry as God’s activity since the beginning (Ray Anderson’s quotation) a new understanding for you?

Yes	No
-----	----

20. Does the United Methodist Church in Nebraska faces a crisis in leadership?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

21. How well do you “understand the times” following the Leadership Conference?

Much Better	Better	Still Processing
-------------	--------	------------------

22. Have many United Methodist churches in Nebraska have lost their purpose?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

23. Have many United Methodist churches in Nebraska have lost their identity?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

24. Do members know the purpose of this congregation?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

25. Do members know that the church is to have a Missional identity?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

26. Does the present leadership in United Methodist churches in Nebraska:

- | | | |
|---|-----|----|
| <input type="radio"/> Have their focus on Christ? | Yes | No |
| <input type="radio"/> Bible-shaped in believing and acting? | Yes | No |
| <input type="radio"/> Take risks? | Yes | No |
| <input type="radio"/> Are courageous in leading change? | Yes | No |

27. Has this congregation has become too comfortable in its existence?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

28. Does Valentine Church have to unlearn old practices of ministry in order to learn a missional identity?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

29. A Missional Church is “a church that is shaped by participating in God’s mission, which is to set things right in a broken and sinful world, to redeem it, and to restore it to what God has always intended for the world.”

Is this a new understand of church identity for you?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

30. Do members of Valentine Church need to unlearn their current understanding of church in order to experience a revitalized spirit and Missional identity?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

31. Do members of Valentine Church understand that church leaders must rethink ministry?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

32. Do members of Valentine Church recognize the importance of high expectation regarding membership?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

33. Do members of Valentine Church believe and comprehend the importance of authentic, Christian living?

Yes	Somewhat	No
-----	----------	----

34. Do members of Valentine Church believe and realize the necessity for obedience?

Yes

Somewhat

No

35. Do members of Valentine Church place high value on corporate worship with the Body of Christ?

Yes

Somewhat

No

36. Do members of Valentine Church believe that they are being sent out into the world as missionaries?

Yes

Somewhat

No

37. Do members of Valentine Church believe that the congregation needs to regain a sense of purpose?

Yes

Somewhat

No

38. Do members of Valentine Church believe that members need to see this church as a church on a mission?

Yes

Now I do

No

39. If Valentine Church begins to see itself on God's mission (purpose) and begins to see itself as a missional church (identity), do you believe that

○ The church will become extinct, like the dinosaurs Yes No

○ This congregation can seize the day and thrive Yes No

40. How will you act on what you have heard today? _____

41. Additional Comments on the Leadership Conference _____

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VITA

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His formal education began in the Shenandoah Community School District, earning and receiving a high school diploma in 1981. Upon completion of the required studies at Shenandoah High School, he entered Iowa Wesleyan College, Mount Pleasant, Iowa. In 1986, he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Political Science.

From 1986 to 1989, the author substitute taught in various schools in the Shenandoah area. Moving to Omaha, he began work and attended Rockbrook United Methodist Church when a call to ministry came. In the spring of 1990, he entered Methodist Theological Seminary in Ohio (Delaware, Ohio). After attending one semester, he felt a call to enter military service.

From 1990 to 1994, the author served in the United States Navy, receiving training as a Hospital Corpsman with a specialty in psychiatric medicine. He worked at Great Lakes Naval Training Station Hospital, Great Lakes, Illinois, on the inpatient, psychiatric unit then at boot camp. Upon completion of his tour of duty, he received an Honorable discharge.

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